

Being Feminist as a Discourse?
Investigating Narrative Cinema with Female Protagonists Directed
by Chinese Post-Fifth-Generation Filmmakers

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies
The University of Canterbury
2012

Abstract

Since the naming of the Chinese Fifth Generation in the 1980s, generational study became an important methodology in Chinese film studies. The Chinese directors up to the mid-1980s are categorised into five generations. However, the directors emerging after the Fifth Generation do not so far have a certain generational name. Thus, the identification of this “nameless” group, which is called the post-fifth generation in this thesis, is an interesting issue reflecting the political, economical and cultural discourse in contemporary China.

This thesis focuses on these directors’ films narrated with female protagonists, probes the reason why they chose female-centred narratives, and examines how they portrayed women and women’s stories in their filmic representation. In the light of Foucault’s theories of discourse and power, I examine the films as a kind of representation which is generated within discursive formation, and through which the directors identify themselves. The conclusion reached by the discussion is that both the female and the male directors studied in this thesis present very feminine discourse in their films. While the female directors are emphasising, even advertising their identity as women, their male counterparts are trying very hard to simulate and perform a feminine identification. This finding exactly answers the question in the thesis title. Since femininity is something that can be chosen, simulated, used, and played, the word “feminist” can also become a cultural brand from which the directors can benefit.

Acknowledgement

I would like to first thank my supervisor, Dr. Adam Lam, who introduced me to New Zealand, picked me up at Christchurch airport, and inspired me to adopt my thesis topic. He and his excellent work always encouraged and supported me to finish this thesis in a second language. I would also like to thank Dr. Mary Wiles, my associate supervisor. As a woman and a westerner, she always provided me with some inspiring ideas from a point of view differing from Adam's.

I am particularly grateful to Dr. Peter Low who selflessly offered me invaluable help in proofreading my thesis. In my eyes, he is a typical kiwi guy in Christchurch, always happy to help others. His help is significant to my thesis.

Then I would like to thank all my friends and fellow students. They have brought colour, courage and inspiration to my life which helped me through a time when I was down and lonely. A special thank you to Kelly, Sarah and their family. When we three were living together, they looked after me like sisters. They gave me a home away from home. Moreover, Kelly is always the initial proofreader of my drafts.

Finally, I would like to thank my dear husband Glenn, who knows how to make me confident when I doubt myself, and how to make me happy when I am down.

Kia ora koutou! Thank you!!

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	English	Chinese Original	Hanyu Pinyin Romanisation
BFA	Beijing Film Academy	北京电影学院	Beijing Diany Xueyuan
CAD	The Central Academy of Drama	中央戏剧学院	Zhongyang X Xueyuan
CCTV	Chinese Central TV Station	中央电视台	Zhongyang Dianshitai
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	中国共产党	Zhongguo Gongchandang
KMT	Kuo Ming Tang	中国国民党	Guomingdang
PRC	People's Republic of China	中华人民共和国	Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo
SARFT	The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China	中国国家广播电 影电视总局	Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Diany Dianshi Zongju

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Defining the Post-Fifth Generation

Film was introduced to China in the 1890s by French, American and Spanish showmen. The first recorded screening of a motion picture in China occurred in Shanghai on August 11, 1896, as an “act” on a variety bill. The Chinese participation in film production started with documentary filmmaking: a recording of Beijing Opera *Conquering Jun Mountain* (定军山, Dingjunshan, dir. Ren Qingtai, 任庆泰) was made in November 1905 as the first Chinese film.¹ “As if by coincidence, the opera movie as a distinguished Chinese genre came into being.”² However, Chinese filmmaking as an industry did not begin until 1912, when Zhang Shichuan (张石川) and Zheng Zhengqiu (郑正秋) cooperated with the Americans in charge of the Asia Company (亚细亚影戏公司, Yaxiya yingxi gongsi, set up by Benjamin Brasky in 1909) and produced *The Difficult Couple* (难夫难妻, Nanfunanqi, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1913).

Since its first attempt at filmmaking with *Conquering Jun Mountain*, Chinese cinema has accumulated a history of more than one hundred years. During these years, Chinese cinema has developed from a cluster of family businesses to a market of competing studios and theatres, has survived war devastation and government interference, and has enriched cinematic arts with ingenious narratives and visual

¹ Martin Geiselmann, “Chinese Film History: A Short Introduction” (The University of Vienna-Sinologie Program, 2006), accessed July 20, 2011, http://www.univie.ac.at/Sinologie/repository/ueLK110_ChinFilmgesch/filmgeschichteSkript.pdf.

² Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology: A Centennial Review of Chinese Cinema”, *World Literature Today* 77 (Oct.-Dec. 2009): 8.

inventions. Despite being launched later than its European and American counterparts, Chinese cinema has become a significant player in the international film arena by regularly receiving top awards at various international film festivals and stepping into the international film market. Since this thesis will focus only on the Chinese language features made by directors born and raised in mainland China, those Chinese language films made in Hong Kong, Taiwan or other territories are not discussed.

From the early 1990s, some young directors appeared and caught the attention of film critics, theorists, investors, and audiences both home and abroad. Most of them were born between 1960 and 1970, and they include several 1989-class graduates of the Beijing Film Academy (BFA), such as Zhang Yuan (张元), Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅), and Guan Hu (管虎). Thereafter, more and more young artists, who came from various education backgrounds, engaged in filmmaking either independently or within the institution. These young filmmakers broke the monopoly of the professional educational background which especially denotes the education experience in BFA, created films with various themes and styles, and gained domestic and international recognition step by step. However, they have hitherto never had an agreed name.

The generational study of Chinese film development was established after the Fifth Generation filmmakers presented an obvious group characteristic and strength. There are several different descriptions of how the generational approach originated. According to Zheng Dongtian's memory, it was launched with an argument about the

relationships between the masters and disciples (师承关系, Shicheng guanxi) among Chinese directors at a conference focusing on the latest national releases including *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, Huangtudi, dir. Chen Kaige, 陈凯歌, 1985) in 1984. In brief, some film theorists, especially those teaching in BFA like Huang Shixian (黄世宪)³, subsequently categorised Chinese directors up to the mid-1980s into five generations.

The First Generation comprises film pioneers who introduced motion pictures to China at the turn of the 20th century and who subsequently ventured into film production in the 1910s and 1920s, exemplified by Zhang Shichun, Zheng Zhengqiu, Dan Duyu (但杜宇), Yang Xiaozhong (杨小仲), as well as the pioneers of Chinese costume drama, the Shaw brothers. The First Generation, including approximately one hundred filmmakers, experimented with films of various styles and genres and eventually settled for commercial entertainment features in the 1920s.

The Second Generation includes the leftist filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s who cultivated a realist tradition that blended classical Hollywood with the tradition of Chinese performing arts. The prominent figures of this generation were Cheng Bugao (程步高), Zheng Junli (郑君里), Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生), Shi Dongshan (史东山), Sun Yu (孙瑜), Tian Han (田汉), Shen Xiling (沈西苓), Sang Hu (桑弧), Fei Mu (费穆) and Wu Yonggang (吴永刚). For this generation, Chinese film was no longer a pure entertainment, but started to carry ideological and sociological content.

The Third Generation consists of both the disciples of the second generation and

³ Huang Shixian is an important film theorist in China.

the self-taught leftist filmmakers of the 1940s who practised film production in the communist army and made political films under the CCP's doctrine after 1949. Represented by Xie Jin (谢晋), Cheng Yin (成荫), Shui Hua (水华), Cui Wei (崔嵬), Xie Tieli (谢铁骊), Ling Zifeng (凌子风), and Li Jun (李俊), this generation formed the nucleus of the newly nationalised film industry from the 1950s to the 1960s. Among them, Xie Jin was no doubt the most prominent, being active in film production for around five decades (the early 1950s- the late 1990s).

The Fourth Generation was the first generation of professional filmmakers who received formal film training in the late 1950s and early 1960s under the socialist educational system. Because the previous generation was still active throughout the 1960s, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had almost abolished film production for ten years, the Fourth Generation could only play a supporting role in filmmaking until the end of the Cultural Revolution. Represented by Wu Yigong (吴贻弓), Wu Tianming (吴天明), Huang Shuqin (黄蜀芹), Xie Fei (谢飞), ZhengDongtian (郑洞天), and Zhang Nuanxin (张暖忻), to name a few, this generation is characterized as a “transitional generation” by the Chinese film critic Ni Zhen (倪震).⁴ With their foci on human emotions and people's lives, as well as their exploration into cinematic narrative and style, they liberated the Chinese cinema from being a pure political propaganda tool.

The Fifth Generation specifically refers to the filmmakers who graduated from

⁴ Ni Zhen, “Cinema and Contemporary Life (电影与当代生活)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5, 2 (1985): 43-60.

BFA in 1982, the first graduates after the reopening of the academy, when the lecturers there were mainly from the Fourth Generation. Spending most of their maturing teenage years during the Cultural Revolution and exploring Western cinema and film theories in the academy, these filmmakers were well equipped to begin their unparalleled careers when the “open-door policy”⁵ started to bear fruit in the mid-1980s. Eventually, their films became the most noticeable Chinese films in both Chinese and international film arenas in the 1980s. To many overseas audiences, the Fifth Generation represented by Zhang Yimou (张艺谋) and Chen Kaige could be all they know of Chinese cinema.

Following the tradition of generational study in Chinese film, not only the film critics and scholars, but also mass audiences, have kept trying to categorise the filmmakers younger than the Fifth Generation into another generation over the past two decades. Yet the generational categorisation of these directors is still a controversial issue in film academia.

Since these directors started their careers after the success of the Fifth Generation, many people, both inside and outside the professional film production and film studies domains, call them “**the Sixth Generation**”⁶ (第六代 Diliudai).

⁵ The term “open-door policy” used in this thesis especially refers to the Chinese international trade policy of opening up to the outside world which was introduced after Deng Xiaoping took office in 1978.

⁶ These filmmakers have been named as “sixth-generation” in the following books or essays, Zhu Ying, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reforms: the Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 7; Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang & Tani E. Barlow (London: Verso, 2002): 71-98; Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, “Globalization and Youthful Subculture: The Chinese Sixth-Generation Films at the Dawn of the New Century”, in *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, ed. Jenny

According to the Chinese traditional pattern of filmmakers' categorisation, the criteria for demarcation are their education backgrounds, especially the relationships between the masters and disciples as mentioned above. In short, the younger generation was apprenticed to the elder one to some degree. Yet there is no master-disciple relationship between the Fifth Generation and the so-called Sixth Generation. Furthermore, more than half of these directors do not have an orthodox film-directing education background. Thus, we cannot simply name them as the Sixth Generation, following the Fifth Generation. Some film theorists narrow the extension of the Sixth Generation into the directing class of BFA that graduated in 1989. Although this criterion used in this definition is similar to that of the Fifth Generation, these young people who grew up in a particular decade of Chinese reform between 1980 and 1990 pursue more individualism compared to their predecessors. Despite all being classmates, they show no consistent thematic or stylistic pattern in their works⁷. Accordingly, even if we name them the Sixth Generation, we cannot generalise their films into Sixth-Generation cinema, so the name will never have the same level of signification as that of the Fifth Generation.

Some film theorists call them **the Urban Generation**.⁸ In *The Urban*

Kwok Wah Lau (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003), 13-27; Yang Yuanying, "The Generation Research of Chinese Filmmakers (百年六代, 影像中国——关于中国电影导演的代际谱系研寻)", *Dangdai dianying* 6 (2001): 99-105, etc.

⁷ I argue that the so-called six-generation filmmakers have few common characteristics whether in terms of their film styles and themes or in terms of their individual experiences and pursuits, in the essay written with Adam Lam in 2006. Adam Lam & Huang Yin, "A Generation Messier than the Messy Hair: Characteristics of the 'Six-Generation' Directors through Guan Hu's *Dirt* (比头发还乱的一代——从管虎看中国“第六代”导演的个性)", *Journal of Shanghai University* 13, 6 (2006): 24-28.

⁸ The term "Urban generation" was coined in a film programme presented in spring 2001 at the Walter Reade Theatre at New York's Lincoln Centre on the Performing Arts. The programme showed an array of Chinese films made by the directors after the Fifth Generation. "The Urban Generation: Chinese

Generation, the book edited by Zhang Zhen, she states that her and her colleagues call the young filmmakers the Urban generation, “who emerged in the shadow both of the international fame of the Fifth Generation directors and of the suppressed democracy movement in 1989” and whose works “centred on the experience of urbanization”⁹. Admittedly, compared to the Fifth-Generation directors who have a particular passion for countryside themes, these younger filmmakers pay more attention to the urban experience. However, some films describing lives in the urban outskirts or countryside are also representative pieces among their works, such as *Shanghai Dreams* (青红, Qinghong, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005), *Mountain Patrol* (可可西里, Kekesili, dir. Lu Chuan, 陆川, 2004), and *Cry Woman* (哭泣女人, Kuqi nüren, dir. Liu Bingjian, 刘冰鉴, 2002). It seems too arbitrary to ignore all their countryside thematic works.

With more and more young people entering filmmaking with different education backgrounds, disciplines, artistic styles and objectives of filmmaking, some critics and theorists just simply summarise them as a **New Generation**¹⁰ (新生代

Cinema in Transformation” was the title of this touring film programme organised by Zhang Zhen and Jia Zhangke. After that, some film critics and theorists represented by Zhang Zhen call these young directors the Urban generation.

⁹ Zhang Zhen ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁰ Quite a few Chinese film theorists call these young filmmakers as new-generation directors in their essays. For example, Gao Li & Feng Zhimin, “Infatuated with Mirror Image and Seeking for the Records of Actual Events: On Two Kinds of Texts of New-generation Directors (镜像迷恋与纪实寻求——论新生代导演的两类文本)”, *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University (Social Sciences)* 6, 5 (2005): 1-7; Nie Wei, “SMHM: The Analysis of Cultural Modes in Visual Dissemination of the New Generation (SMHM:新生代影像传播的文化模式分析)”, *Literature and Art Studies* 1 (2006): 97-102; Qian Chunlian & Qiu Baolin, “On the Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies of the New-Generation Film Conductors (论新生代电影导演的跨文化传播策略)”, *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* 4 (2006), etc.

Xinshengdai), which actually means the newly emerged generation. However, in any case, “new” is an ambiguous adjective in terms of academia. There is no concise standard at all to normalise how new can be regarded as “new”. Furthermore, “to be new” is an ephemeral state. Thus, in my opinion, New Generation is a name that can be used within a popular context, but not in an academic one.

Some scholars, such as Wang Yichuan, Adam Lam and Dai Jinhua, claim that the generational paradigm as a whole is no longer relevant in the 1990s.¹¹ The Chinese filmmakers after the Fifth Generation are impossible to summarise into a certain generation, due to the discursive contemporary cultural context and the lack of common experience and education background among the filmmakers. Therefore, I refer to them as the “Chinese post-fifth generation” in this thesis, which simply describes the fact that they emerged in Chinese film production after the Fifth Generation.

The term “post-fifth generation” also appears in Dai Jinhua’s and Ni Zhen’s essays, and is used to describe a subsequent group of directors who are contemporaries of the Fifth Generation.¹² However, the definition of the post-fifth generation used here is different from that of Dai and Ni. In this thesis, “the post-fifth generation” refers to the filmmakers who have made films in China between 1989 and now. The word “generation” here does not have the same significance as that in “the

¹¹ Wang Yichuan, “Chinese Cinema during the Era of Post-Generation (无代期中国电影)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5 (1994): 20-27; Adam Lam & Huang Yin, “A Generation Messier than the Messy Hair”, 24-28; Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 74-78.

¹² Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 78; Ni Zhen, “The Marching of the Post-Fifth Generation (后五代的步伐)”, *Dazhong dianying* 4 (1989): 11.

Fifth Generation”. Different from the appellation “Fifth Generation” which specially connotes aesthetic and ideological signification, “the post-fifth-generation” is a term that does not imply any common characteristics in themes, aesthetics or styles in the films. In a nutshell, “the post-fifth generation” does not conform to the conventional meaning of “generation”. Consequently, I use lowercase in “the post-fifth generation” to distinguish it from other generations mentioned with capital letters – “post-fifth-generation filmmakers” simply refers to the filmmakers who started their careers after the Fifth Generation. Since the post-fifth generation is NOT a generation in a conventional context, the conception of **post-fifth-generation film** is not tenable either. As mentioned above, the films made by these directors do not show obvious common characteristics in film aesthetic, theme, or narrative. Though these films are made by post-fifth-generation filmmakers, they are not categorised into post-fifth-generation films. In other words, I only use the terms “post-fifth generation” and “post-fifth-generation filmmakers”, but not the term “post-fifth-generation films” here, because the conception of post-fifth-generation film does not exist in this thesis at all.

The criteria for the selection of filmmakers in this thesis are three:

1. citizens of the PRC;
2. born and grew up in mainland China¹³;

¹³ In my opinion, a “Chinese director” must have grown up in Mainland China so that he/she has received the traditional domestic education and established his/her foundational cognition of philosophy, value, and life in a Chinese way.

3. started filmmaking after 1989.

1.2 Major Research on Post-Fifth-Generation to Date

Although hitherto the post-fifth generation does not have a widely agreed name among academia, these filmmakers and their films have already been extensively included in the studies of contemporary Chinese cinema and culture. These studies are usually around the following issues: the aesthetic characteristics of their films, urbanised or marginalised themes of their films, their independent production in early works, and their return to production under censorship.

When studying these filmmakers and their works, some film theorists first attempt to analyse the Chinese socio-cultural environment of the early 1990s – the period when these filmmakers were launched. Dai Jinhua describes the Chinese culture at that time as “a city of mirrors” and “a scene in the fog”.¹⁴ In her opinion, the Chinese cultural context is extremely discursive:

In the nineties, however, the following elements feed a different sociocultural situation: the ambiguous ideology of the post-Cold War era; the implosion and diffusion of mainstream ideology; global capitalism’s tidal force and the resistance of nationalism and nativisms; the penetration and impact of global capital on local cultural industries; culture’s increasing commercialization in

¹⁴ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 72.

global and local culture markets; and the active role local intellectuals, besieged by postmodern and postcolonial discourse, have undertaken in their writing. Nineties Chinese culture is in fact becoming a unique space, open to crisscrossing perspectives: it is a city of mirrors.¹⁵

Thus, the so-called Sixth Generation – the post-fifth generation in this thesis – is a part of this “scene in the fog”, as she further argues:

Even before its appearance, the Sixth generation was already predicted and outlined in various cultural yearnings and lacks. Not only did the naming of Sixth Generation precede its praxis, its discourse up to now remains a pastiche of linguistic journeys in search of the signified or the signifier. Consequently, the Sixth Generation is an entangled cultural phenomenon tucked away under various names, discourses, cultures and ideologies.¹⁶

To probe this opinion, Dai pays special attention to the independent works among the films of the post-fifth generation. Since *Mama* (妈妈, Mama, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1990) made an enviable journey through a dozen Euro-American film festivals and simultaneously gained dazzling accolades, independent (or even “underground”, “anti-government”, “dissident”) production, has become certainly a politicised term in Western discourse. “Independent works, including the coarser and weaker ones, were highly praised”, Dai indicates, because “the criterion in selecting Chinese films for international acknowledgment was no longer based on given Western art standards

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 74.

(even orientalist ones), but exclusively on the films' production style and the official Chinese filmmaking system."¹⁷ As a result, some successors started to imitate this production method as a particular cultural position and a particular political gesture.

The independent filmmakers began by breaking out of the Chinese cultural predicament. It was a pauper's moving and dramatic infatuation with the art of film. Some of their successors copied and benefitted from their cultural posturing. In a sense, on the nineties cultural stage, in the repertoire co-directed by conflicting power centres, the role of "independent filmmaker" acquired specified meanings and clear pros and cons; it became a role worthy of imitating and performing.¹⁸

Adam Lam has also analysed the motives concealed under the trend of sending films to international film festivals illegally, especially of those so-called sixth-generation productions. Instead of reading them metaphorically as Dai, Lam focuses on the contemporary Chinese cultural phenomenon within a postmodern context.

China in the 1990s, however, was in a transitional period from a pre-industrialized society to a society that combined with industrialized and post-industrialized characteristics in a historic, transnational capitalist, postmodern context.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹ Adam Lam, *Identity, Tradition and Globalism in Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Feature Films*, a

Through studying Zhang Yuan and Guan Hu's films, Lam portrays the cognitive mapping of the so-called sixth generation as a typical reflection of globalism in the 1990s Chinese film industry. In his opinion, the formations of the so-called sixth generation rather than the contents of their film works are "hyperreal"²⁰.

Young directors like Zhang and Guan were generated into models of the sixth generation. The sixth generation, on the other hand is a hyperrealist abstraction through film critics' simulation. The international spotlights shone on these young directors, particularly on Zhang, helped to establish a newer, hyperreal Chinese film generation. The sixth generation, thus, resulted from as well as reflected the postmodern globalism in the 1990s international film market.²¹

Therefore, to these young directors, "independence" is a political and cultural gesture aimed at the international market rather than a discourse of rebellion they self-proclaimed.

Be it cultural, historical or political, their value in the international market (or to say the reason the international market embraces them) is to provide such a national artifice of China for international audiences. ...The cultural and political values of these films in the international film market become secondary

thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Chinese Studies (Auckland: University of Auckland, 2000), 285.

²⁰ The term "hyperreal" is from Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.

²¹ Lam, *Identity, Tradition and Globalism in Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Feature Films*, 292.

to their commercial values as cultural commodities in the postmodern world.²²

These arguments that render the naming of “The Sixth Generation” and these directors’ independent production into a political strategy inspire me to analyse their films with power and discourse theories. Nevertheless, I will interlace the power between genders with that between the West and the East in analysing the selected films that are oriented towards an international market.

Also analysing contemporary Chinese films in a cultural studies approach, others including Chris Berry and Zhang Yingjin describe the contemporary Chinese cultural context from a postsocialist perspective. According to Zhang’s argument in his essay “Rebel without a Cause?”,²³ postsocialism is a term which can describe the “varied landscape of culture in post-Mao (post-Tiananmen era) China against which filmmakers of different generations, aesthetic aspirations, and ideological persuasions struggle to readjust or redefine their different strategic positions in different social, political, and economic situations.”²⁴ Chris Berry also claims that contemporary Chinese cinema can only be understood in a postsocialist context. He further indicates that postsocialism in contemporary China “has more parallels with postmodernism, where the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost.”²⁵

The post-fifth generation entered the film market after the government had

²² Ibid., 294.

²³ Zhang Zhen ed., *Urban Generation*, 51-80.

²⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁵ Ibid., 116.

launched the development of a market economy and had instituted a series of reforms. As the first generation of Chinese filmmakers since the establishment of PRC to have to face and solve the financial problems all by themselves, they started their careers confronting several major challenges in film production – the decline of most state-owned film studios, the benchmarks set by the great achievement of the Fifth Generation, and box-office pressures. The lack of work opportunities in the state-run studios hence caused most of these young filmmakers to embark on independent/underground film production. As Zhang Zhen argues:

What makes the works of the Sixth Generation more symptomatic of postsocialism than their predecessors is their institutionally imposed but self-glorified status of marginality in a crucial turning point in postsocialism as a regime of political economy.²⁶

In 1999, Zhang Yuan made *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, Guonian huijia) under the supervision of the Film Bureau. Subsequently, these young directors followed suit. Theorists analyse the reason for their collective return to the system approved by the Chinese government from different perspectives. Lau indicates that some independent filmmakers tried to strike a compromise because of financial difficulty.²⁷ By contrast, Berenice Reynaud forcefully asserts that making films within the system is a way of repositioning oneself at the centre.²⁸ In Zhang Yingjin's view, their returning was due to the double functions of governmental promotion and their own desire to be part of

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Zhang Zhen ed., *The Urban Generation*, 281.

mainstream production. “A willingness to participate in mainstream filmmaking,” he further argues, “is similarly reflected in the new directors’ preference for contemporary urban life as their subject matter.”²⁹ Reynaud’s and Zhang’s arguments can be extended to the issue of identification. In this thesis, I will further study what kind of identity these directors are pursuing or performing, and how they achieve it through their filmic discourse.

As mentioned in 1.1, many film theorists and critics focused on the post-fifth generation’s depiction of urban life and their own urbanised experiences. Besides these analyses, some critics have also identified common features in these filmmakers’ filmic theme and expression strategies. Dai once summarised the post-fifth generation’s early works as “the story of the ruthless youth”.³⁰ Linda Chiu-han Lai demonstrates their focus on drifting and flaner themes through the analysing of *Xiao Wu* (小武, Xiaowu, dir. Jia Zhangke, 贾樟柯, 1997), *Suzhou River* (苏州河, Suzhou he, dir. Lou Ye, 娄烨, 1999) and *In Expectation* (巫山云雨, Wushanyunyu, dir. Zhang Ming, 章明, 1996).³¹ Zhang Zhen indicates that some of these young filmmakers share “a conviction in cinema’s capacity to create a new order of reality – a dimension of evoked memory and felt affect and connective”³² in their works such as *Lunar Eclipse* (月蚀, Yueshi, dir. Wang Quan’an, 王全安, 1999) and *Suzhou River*, and summarises them into a term “Urban dreamscape”³³. Through

²⁹ Ibid., 69.

³⁰ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 93-96.

³¹ Linda Chiu-han Lai, “Whither the Walker Goes: Spatial Practices and Negative Poetics in 1990s Chinese Urban Cinema”. In *The Urban Generation*, ed. Zhang Zhen, 205-237.

³² Zhang Zhen ed., *The Urban Generation*, 375.

³³ Ibid., 345- 387.

analysing the same two films, Sun Shaoyi reveals the directors' desire to recover the "denied half" – displaying the "personal" speaking subject beside the "national" one – which had been erased by the Western critique of Third World texts.³⁴ This thesis will also discuss the post-fifth generation's theme preferences. However, besides attributing the thematic issue to the directors' own experiences (which they can hardly choose by themselves), I presume their thematic choices are rather related to their discourse and self-identification.

As well as the studies of these filmmakers and their films as a generation, some other film theorists and critics take up auteur-studies on some representative directors, such as Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Lou Ye. Zhang Yuan, as the first and leading director in this generation, is always under the spotlight. Many scholars use his films to illustrate their conclusion about this group of directors. Some others study him and his works as an individual case. For instance, Reynaud has specifically analysed, in his essay "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities", the "realism" in Zhang's films. Reynaud reaches his conclusion that this "'realism' reveals a certain ambivalence".³⁵ There are also some studies of other similarly remarkable directors in this group, such as Jason Mcgrath's "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic"³⁶ and Nie Wei's "Contemporary Urban Movie and Floating Desire among the People: On Wang

³⁴ Sun Shaoyi. "In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers of China", in Kong Haili & John A. Lent, *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: a Generational Dialogue* (Norwalk, CT, USA: EastBridge, 2006), 184.

³⁵ Kong & Lent ed., *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema*, 267.

³⁶ Zhang Zhen ed., *The Urban Generation*, 81-114.

Xiaoshuai”.³⁷ In addition, there are quite a few case-studies of films directed by post-fifth-generation filmmakers, for example, Sean Metzger’s “The Little (Chinese) Mermaid, or Importing ‘Western’ Femininity in Lou Ye’s *Suzhou he* (*Suzhou River*)”,³⁸ Huang Shixian’s “*Lunar Eclipse: An Avant-garde Film Aroused Discussion about Chinese Cinema*”³⁹, Wang Xianping’s “A Melancholy Song of Women and the Myth of Time: A Reading of *The Road*”⁴⁰, and Yang Junlei’s “History and Individuals in Image Memories: The Realistic Quality in *Shanghai Dreams*”⁴¹, etc.

Some of the data and analyses in these author studies and case studies are insightful resources for this research. However, most of them are in Chinese, revealing the fact that insufficient research has been done in this area by English-speaking academia, even though Chinese cinema as a research subject has been explored to a great extent in that domain.

1.3 Research Scopes and Research Questions

Focusing on narrative films with female-protagonist(s) directed by the Chinese post-fifth generation, this thesis will unavoidably use some feminist and film theories. Nonetheless, it is necessary to make following three important clarifications of my research scopes before further discussion.

³⁷ *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* 28, 1 (2006): 85-90.

³⁸ Andrew David Jackson, Michael Gibb & Dave White ed., *How East Asian Films Are Reshaping National Identities: Essays on the Cinemas of China, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 135-154.

³⁹ *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2 (2000): 29-36.

⁴⁰ *Dangdai dianying* 6 (2007): 156-158.

⁴¹ *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* 28, 1 (2006): 101-105.

1. Filmmakers entered the industry in the same era rather than belonging to the same “generation”

This research does not study the filmmakers and their works as a generation. As mentioned above, the post-fifth generation here is simply a collective name to indicate those contemporary Chinese filmmakers who started their careers after the famous Fifth Generation. Admittedly, some of these filmmakers, especially those of a similar age and from a similar educational background, do share some common characteristics in filmmaking with respect to themes, aesthetics and production mode. This often happens to artists working in the same era. Nevertheless, their films display much more diversity than the previous generations. Moreover, though making films in the same historical context, they present very different discourses from each other through their filmmaking. This excludes them from the traditional categorical criteria of Chinese generational studies. Simply, they are considered as a group of contemporary Chinese filmmakers rather than a generation in my research. Therefore, I neither analyse them and their films from a generational perspective nor intend to identify their generational characteristics.

2. A Cultural Studies research rather than a Film Studies one

This research is launched as a macro cultural study rather than a film study. Instead of emphasising aesthetic studies, I rather analyse these films and their aesthetic features like theme, narrative, visual presentation, and filmic style as cultural texts that reflect the issues of value orientation, cultural recognition and identification

in China's contemporary economic, political and cultural contexts. In an era of globalisation, the aesthetics and discourses presented (or implied) in these films, always to some extent take into consideration the international market and international recognition. They could even mirror the power relation between China and the West. Therefore, the study will not be limited to the textual analysis of films using the mise-en-scene, montage or other ontological theories. Rather, I will use theories in the film studies sphere to decode the visual language and cinematic presentation of these films, and then further probe the discourses and identities employed by these filmmakers using Michel Foucault's theories of power and discourse, Stuart Hall's theories of identity and media, and Jean Baudrillard's theories of seduction.

3. A gender-neutral approach rather than a feminist one

I do NOT assume a feminist standpoint in my arguments. The research objects are films with female-protagonists, and I the author am a **woman**. However, I attempt to analyse and argue from a gender-neutral standpoint by using Foucault, Baudrillard and Hall's approaches as the theoretical framework. I will not criticise the female images and narratives in the selected films from a feminist point of view to estimate whether these films present a feminist standpoint or discourse, whether they can be deemed to be progressive from a feminist approach or not. By the same token, I will not analyse these films as texts to reflect the factual, social, and cultural position of women. My endeavour in this thesis is to probe why these directors place women in

the central roles in their filmic narratives, how they use these women as a kind of gender pose, what kind of cultural discourse they present through these women's images and narratives, and how these films with female-protagonist(s) mirror the directors' self-identification in the contemporary cultural context. To avoid a gender standpoint, I frequently use the phrase "feminine discourse" rather than "female discourse" or "feminist discourse". What is more, this thesis will deconstruct the label "feminist" to a large extent by analysing the representation of women from a Foucauldian approach. According to Foucault, discourse does not belong to a gender, but is formed by power. The term "feminist" hence, to some extent, implies a part of the power game. I assume therefore that the "female narrative", "feminist standpoint" and "femininity" are forms of discursive posture and cultural label that can be chosen, used, and performed.

Therefore, I seek answers to the following questions through my research:

1. Do the images of women in the films directed by Chinese post-fifth-generation directors have any unique characteristics in contrast to the films directed by directors in earlier generations? If there are any, can these characteristics be considered "feminist"?
2. Does the gender of the filmmaker play a determinative role in the construction of a female narrative? Whilst designing female protagonist(s) as the leading role(s) of their films, are the female directors delivering female consciousness through them or not? Is this achieved by their male

counterparts?

3. Are there any significant differences between the women's images and narratives in the films directed by post-fifth-generation female directors and those in the films directed by their female predecessors? If there are any, what are they? Furthermore, does the phrase "female director" today contain the same cultural implication or connote the same female image as before?
4. Are the female narratives and feminine discourses presented in female directors' films simply generated as a product of their gender, or, are they strategically designed to emphasise their gender and their "feminist standpoint" as a cultural label?
5. Is it possible for the male directors to "speak" from a female point of view? Is it possible for their films to articulate a female discourse? No matter whether the answer is positive or negative, why do these men endeavour to simulate a feminine discourse? What are they trying to display or disguise within a feminine discourse? Is it related to their own identification?
6. Do the male directors still construct a male spectatorship in the films with female protagonist(s)? By the same token, do female directors avoid the male spectatorship, or set up a corresponding female spectatorship?
7. Do the male directors "gaze" at the women in their films as the Other, or do

they speak through them as avatars? What about their female counterparts?

8. Can the female discourse and feminine discourse become a kind of cultural gesture and label which can be adopted, used, or simulated in the power game?

1.4 Methodology

Since the first issue of an American journal *Women and Film* focused attention on women's image in film in 1972, feminist studies of films have been an important part of the feminist movement. Many feminist critics and theorists have combined psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches with a feminist approach to analyse female images in films. This method focuses on the paradigm of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look"⁴², arguing that women on screen serve as sexual objects for male audiences' voyeurism and fetishism. Meanwhile, the analysis of female images in the films made in the Third World often interlaces with a post-colonialist and nationalist criticism. Such a method usually considers the female roles as visual spectacle not only under the gaze of men but also under the gaze of the West. In addition, the depictions of women on screen are also analysed as texts in social and political studies. However, no matter from which perspective we read the women in a film – feminism, psychoanalysis, sociology, post-colonialism, postmodernism, or politics – in my

⁴² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1989), 19.

opinion, they all converge into one approach: power and discourse. As a result, I will use Michel Foucault's theories of power and discourse as my theoretical framework. Foucault's theories were launched in the Cold War period, however, since then the economic, political and cultural contexts of both China and the world have changed considerably. Hence I use Jean Baudrillard's theories of seduction and Stuart Hall's theories of identity, which are both postmodernist approaches, to compensate for the limitations in applying Foucauldian theories to a contemporary context.

Power and discourse are the two main Foucauldian concepts. From his point of view, power is everywhere and continues; power forms discourse that constitutes the various extant social practices and institutions; what is more, power produces language and knowledge. According to him, there is no opinion, thought, judgement or idea of an author at all, and all representations are composed by the power and domain discourse.

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.⁴³

As long as representation goes without question as the general element of

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27.

thought, the theory of discourse serves at the same time, and in one and the same movement, as the foundation of all possible grammar and as a theory of knowledge.⁴⁴

Although Foucault has not extended his theories into the media and film domain, these theories are directly applicable to this research because film could be considered a kind of representation and discourse. In “Encoding/Decoding”⁴⁵, Hall demonstrates how the visual-aural language in television and film are constructed and function as a discourse. First, he indicates that mass-communication products circulate in the **discursive** form, which is constituted by discourse according to Foucault⁴⁶. The cycle begins from the production process which constructs the story/representation.

Of course, the production process is not without its ‘discursive’ aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of programme through this production structure.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the visual-aural language in television and film is a coded iconic sign.

“Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 337.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

⁴⁶ The term “discursive formations” is from Foucault, in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 32.

⁴⁷ Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 129.

language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse”⁴⁸. Hall’s arguments provide a theoretical basis to use Foucault’s theories when analysing films as texts in a cultural studies approach.

On the other hand, Baudrillard suggests that the function of power between masculinity and femininity is not linear, but reversible. “Masculinity has always been haunted by this sudden reversibility within the feminine.”⁴⁹ From his point of view, masculine power is a power to produce and the feminine strength is that of seduction.⁵⁰ This argument inspires me to discuss whether the contemporary Chinese filmmakers are deliberately using the power of seduction whilst constructing the female and feminine film narratives. Moreover, he claims that seduction is stronger than power and sexuality today when “the horizon of production is beginning to vanish”⁵¹ and its power is dissipating, because “seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe”⁵². From this aspect, Baudrillard’s theories in postmodernist perspective are an important theoretical supplement in this thesis, which is devoted to examining contemporary Chinese films and their cultural context, since Foucault’s theories were launched in the Cold War era.

Identity and identification is another important issue probed in this research. As an evolution of Foucault’s work, Stuart Hall examines identification from the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15, 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., 46.

⁵² Ibid., 8.

discursive approach in which identification is “a construction”, “a process never complete”, and “always ‘in process’”.⁵³ He suggests that “there is no ‘essential’, ‘true’ or pre-social self but that, instead, identities are constituted or ‘performatively’ enacted in and through the subject positions made available in language and wider cultural codes”⁵⁴. Assuming his perspective that identity is not a “stable core of the self”⁵⁵ but something that can be chosen, constructed and performed, this research also explores how the Chinese post-fifth-generation filmmakers identify themselves through representation in their films, and how they choose and adjust their identification through their filmic discourse.

I selected the Chinese post-fifth-generation directors and their films to be the objects in this research for the following reasons. First, many Chinese and overseas scholars are interested in the Fifth Generation, and have already performed much research on them and their films. This makes the study of the Fifth Generation an almost exhausted topic. Second, the post-fifth generation is not only the youngest and newest group in Chinese film production, but also comprises the only filmmakers who have needed to contend with financing and market issues since they embarked on their careers. As a result their films are effective and unique texts for the study of contemporary Chinese culture.

In this thesis, I only study feature-length narrative films, excluding documentary,

⁵³ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1996), 2.

⁵⁴ Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans & Peter Redman ed., *Identity: A Reader* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 10.

⁵⁵ Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, 3.

video art, short film or online film. The term “narrative films” or “narrative cinema” here refers to the types of films that tell fictional or fictionalised stories, events or narratives. These are the films most widely screened in theatres, broadcast on TV, streamed in the internet, and released as DVDs. Comparing with documentary, video art and short films, feature-length narrative films are a more commercial pursuit and tend to be targeted to a mass audience. From this point of view, the filmic discourses represented in these films are more effective cases for the study of mainstream cultural discourse and to verify the filmmakers’ identification in mainstream discursive context.

Furthermore, in contrast with earlier generations, these directors, whether female or male, are more likely to set up the narrative with female leading roles and their filmic presentations are relatively more feminine. Therefore, I have narrowed the research scope to the narrative cinema with female-protagonist(s) to verify my hypothesis: *The directors’ choice of the protagonists’ gender connoted their choice of discourse and self-identity*. Specifically, the standards of film selection in this thesis are:

1. films in Chinese language (including dialects);
2. feature-length narrative films;
3. films directed by Chinese post-fifth-generation directors;
4. films narrated with female-protagonist(s).

The thesis is divided into four parts containing nine chapters in all. The first

part (Chapter 1 & Chapter 2) is an introduction to the related academic background, research objectives, research methods, theoretical frameworks, and terminology. Arguments are presented in Chapter 2 on how film could be considered as a kind of discourse that is determined by power but simultaneously can be chosen and claimed by the filmmakers, and how the adopted filmic discourses reflect the filmmakers' self-identification and their relation with the contemporary economic, political and cultural context in China.

The next two parts are the case-studies of the selected films. I first address the female directors' films from Chapter 3 to Chapter 5, because their preference for women's stories and narratives tend to be attributed to their immanent self-consciousness. On the other hand, they could also use their own gender to label themselves more naturally with terms like "femininity" and "feminist". The analyses start in Chapter 3 with lesbian-themed films, which are easy to present as extremely feminine and feminist in temperament by portraying female same-sex love. Chapter 4 examines films concentrating on relations among women (not sexual/love relationship) in which men are almost absent. Chapter 5 focuses on films addressing heterosexual romance in which women are positioned in the weak group. If the gender of woman – its narrative, its expression, its feminine temperament, and the feminist denotation often connected with it – can be used by the female directors in the ways that I assume, could male directors also use it? Furthermore, how could they use it? The third part, including Chapters 6, 7 and 8, probes this issue. On the basis of the iconography of the female images portrayed by those younger male directors, this part

aims at investigating their inclination for choosing females to lead their filmic narratives – is it simply an individual preference, or a real reflection of their own discursive status, or a crucial element in their performance on the film arena (domestic and overseas), or a political and cultural strategy from which they profit? Chapter 6 analyses two early films by two post-fifth generation filmmakers both narrated in a Veronique structure, which refers to a narrative with two female protagonists having identical appearance. The discussion in Chapter 7 is based on the comparison between two films, both made by proclaimed independent directors when they endeavoured to shift to production under censorship. The films selected in Chapter 8 are relatively mature works of the post-fifth generation that pattern women's zigzag love life. The fourth part (Chapter 9) is a conclusion of the findings of this research.

1.5 Terminology

Commonly used terminology in film studies, cultural studies and philosophy is applied in this thesis without further reference or explanation. When the term “China” appears in the context of post-1949, it refers to the mainland area of PRC, excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Reference or explanations are given when the thesis mentions Chinese historical events, literature or figures relatively less known in an international sphere.

The term “Chinese films/cinema” could mean one of the following depending on the given context: Chinese language film, film made in China, films made in mainland China, films made by Chinese directors, or films made by directors who are originally from China. When this term is used in a pre-1949 context, it refers to Chinese language films. In the post-1949 context, “Chinese films/cinema” especially refers to Chinese language films made by directors who are originally from mainland China, including those films produced overseas or produced with overseas finance. Chinese language films directed by directors who were born and grew up in mainland China but do not currently live or make films there are still considered Chinese films/cinema in this thesis.

It seems too facile to understand the literal meaning of “narrative cinema with female-protagonist(s)” as merely a narrative film in which one or more than one woman play the central role(s). The term “female-protagonist(s)” in this thesis is not identical to the prominent female figure in a film. A film usually has a most prominent female character, no matter what tasks she takes up or how important she is in this film. Even in a typical male-centric film, for example a conventional Hollywood Western film, there is usually a prominent female role to foil the male hero and to attract the audience’s voyeuristic and fetish look. A prominent female character is not always a necessary role in a narrative, as she may serve as a supplementary narrative element or only be a sexual being. A female-protagonist (in this thesis) is a central, indispensable and unchangeable character in a film. In addition, the whole plot of the story develops around her. She must play a leading role in the narrative, as a

constructor of the plots, and an image that the audience tends to identify with. The story in the film cannot carry on without her, as for example in Yanan in *Lunar Eclipse*, and Yun in *Dam Street* (红颜, Hongyan, dir. Liyu, 李玉, 2005). However, a female-protagonist is not equivalent to “heroine”. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, “heroine” means “the chief female character in a book, play, or film, who is typically identified with good qualities, and with whom the reader is expected to sympathize”;⁵⁶ it therefore particularly refers to the chief female character who has a positive moral appeal. However, whether a woman is a “female-protagonist” or not in a film is demarcated by her function in the narrative, without any moral or emotional implication. Therefore, the phrase “narrative cinema with female-protagonist(s)” means the narrative films led by the female-protagonist(s) (as defined above) in storytelling.

There are two points to be further clarified here. First, the narrative of the films in this thesis must be led only by women. In many cases that depict heterosexual stories or narrate in multiple-storylines, such as *I Love You* (我爱你, Wo’aini, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2003), *Dreams May Come* (梦想照进现实, Mengxiang zhaojin xianshi, dir. Xu Jinglei, 徐静蕾, 2006) and *Men and Women* (男男女女, Nannan nǚnǚ, dir. Liu Bingjian, 1999), a male protagonist carries equal weight in the narrative development to his female counterpart. Such films with the development of a plot led by two genders are excluded from this research. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the films must be single-line narratives with only one leading role. Some films, especially

⁵⁶ Entry of “heroine” in *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd Edition Revised).

those displaying the “women story”, have two or more than two female protagonists. For instance, the stories in both films directed by Ma Liwen (马俪文), *Gone Is the One Who Held Me Dearest in the World* (世界上最疼我的那个人去了, Shijieshang zuitengwode nageren qule, 2002) and *You and Me* (我们俩, Womenlia, 2005), are constructed by two female roles together. This narrative method is more common in lesbian cinema, as we can see in *Fish and Elephant* (今年夏天, Jinnianxiatian, dir. Li Yu, 2001) and *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* (植物学家的女儿, Zhiwuxuejia de nǚ'er, dir. Dai Sijie, 戴思杰, 2006).

Secondly, the definition of narrative cinema with female-protagonist(s) tends to be confused with that of female first-person narrative cinema. To discern these two different conceptions, we must distinguish the protagonist from the narrator. As explained above, a protagonist in a film is a central character in the storyline and the leader of the narrative, but not always the person who tells the story. Many narrative films carry on without a tangible narrator, but by an omnipotent viewpoint instead, though almost all of them have one or more than one tangible protagonist(s). By the same token, the narrator in a film is not identical to the protagonist, because in many cases the storyteller does not tell a story about himself/herself. Thus the narrator in a narrative cinema with female-protagonist(s) does not have to be a woman. For example, in *My Sister's Dictionary* (姐姐词典, Jiejie cidian, dir. Jiang Qinmin, 蒋钦民, 2005), the storyteller is undoubtedly the younger-brother of the protagonist “my sister”, yet he himself has only a supporting role. Some films with male first-person narrators are hence included in this research.

Each English film when it first appears in this thesis will be mentioned with its English title, director and year of first public screening; for example, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (dir. Max Ophuls, 1948). Each Chinese film when it first appears will be mentioned with its English title, Chinese title in Chinese characters, Chinese title in Hanyu Pinyin Romanisation, director and year respectively; for example, *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, Beijing zazhong, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993). Then the English title only will be cited in the rest of the chapter. When the name of a director also first appears in this thesis, the Chinese characters of his/her name will be indicated after its Romanisation; for example, *Three Modern Women* (三个摩登女性, Sange modeng nuxing, dir. Bu Wancang, 卜万苍, 1933). All the films in other languages will be mentioned with English titles, original titles, directors and year respectively when first appearing; for example, *The Double Life of Veronique* (*La Double Vie de Veronique*, dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991). Then the English title only will be cited in the rest of the chapter.

All Chinese book and article titles will be translated into English with the original titles in Chinese characters given in parentheses in footnotes. All the names of mainland Chinese are romanised according to the Hanyu Pinyin system with the Chinese characters in parentheses at their first appearance. These Chinese names are given with family name first. Names of ethnic Chinese overseas, including names of those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, are given as they are commonly addressed with the Chinese characters in parentheses at their first mention; for example, Wong Kar Wai (王家卫). These names are frequently romanised according to the Wade-Giles

system, though many Hong Kong people's names are transcribed in Cantonese pronunciation. These romanised names are also given with family name first. Some ethnic Chinese overseas are known with their English given names, such as Ray Chow and Stanley Kwan. Such names are also given with Chinese characters at their first appearance, but written with given name first. Since some Chinese family names are very common, such as Zhang (张) and Wang (王), Chinese people's names are more frequently referred to in full instead of with the family name alone to avoid possible confusion, except where the family name is rare in China like Guan (管) and Lou (娄). Characters in films are referred to by the names they are most frequently addressed in the film, not necessarily their full names. When addressing contemporary Chinese film and culture, quite a few terms used in this thesis are translated from Chinese, such as May Fourth period and Chuan Opera. These phrases translated from Chinese are given the original Chinese words in both Chinese characters and the Hanyu Pinyin version in parentheses at their first appearance. For example, May Fourth period (“五四”时期, Wusi shiqi) and Chuan Opera (川剧, Chuanju).

Chapter 2

A Feminine Discourse: Representation, Seduction, and Identification

When directors use women as protagonists in films, the directors are commonly assumed to speak from the standpoint of the second-sex and the weaker group. Such a preconception could come from the following approaches: psychoanalysis, sociology and identity. This research, as mentioned in the Introduction, will focus on narrative films with female protagonists directed by the post-fifth-generation filmmakers in China. Through analysing the themes, visual style, film language and female images in selected films, I aim to probe the discourse that the directors adopt and present in their filmic representation, and their identification constructed within these discourses.

In section 2.1, I will discuss how Foucault's theories can be applied to study film from a discursive perspective. In the light of Christian Metz's semiological studies of film, I consider film as a language. Furthermore, according to Foucault, language is always constructed within particular discursive formations. Hence, the filmic representation is constructed inside, not outside discourse. As an evolution of Foucault's work, Stuart Hall examines identification from a discursive approach. I will endeavour to demonstrate the relation between the film directors' self-identification and their filmic representation in 2.2. Although this research is launched as a cultural study rather than a film study, the filmic look/gaze is also an important issue when analysing specific samples of films. Section 2.3 will start with the discussion of the "male gaze". Judith

Butler's and Jean Baudrillard's theories will be employed to study the female directors' identification and their filmic discourse through examining the filmic spectatorship in their films. Then I will extend this discussion into male directors and their works in 2.4, where I will focus on the question why these men endeavour to simulate the female viewpoint or feminine aesthetics in their filmic representation.

2.1 Composing Filmic Discourse

A sequence of images is projected onto a screen in rapid succession (the standard is twenty-four frames per second nowadays) with objects shown in successive positions with slight changes so as to produce the optical effect of a continuous motion in which the objects move; technologically, that is film. Besides, film is also referred to as an art (usually called as the "seventh art"), a commodity and an industry. In this research, I examine the film as a discourse.¹ The term "discourse" used here is discourse in a Foucauldian sense which is studied as a system of representation, and which will be specifically discussed later. To develop my argument, I need to demonstrate how film is composed and functions as a discourse. That is why I start my arguments with the technological features of film.

Film is a sequence of flowing pictures; moreover, these sequential pictures can reflect nature, can record events, can tell stories, can represent. Some theorists like Andre

¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the "film" in this research refers only to narrative film.

Bazin highlight film's achievements in realist aesthetics while underlining its photographic essences. Some filmmakers, represented by Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, explore the creativity and artistic expression of film by applying montage (especially expressive montage) technique. Although these discussions between the realistic and expressionist aesthetics in film studies are not so relevant to this research, they testify to the duplicity of filmic pictures. On the one hand, the photographic image is a mechanical reproduction of reality, and it can only re-present "the present", so that it "shares the being of the model, whose reality is transferred to it"². In Bazin's words:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.³

On the other hand, the filmic pictures are always created on the basis of deliberate choice and arrangement, because the camera is manipulated. As Rudolf Arnheim argues, if cinema were the mere mechanical reproduction of real life it could not be an art at all.⁴ While I do not deny the recording function of the camera, I examine films from the latter viewpoint. First, everything that appears in front of the camera lens – sets, props, actors, costumes, lighting, as well as the positioning and movement of actors on the set – is pre-arranged. At the same time, the photographer controls the camera angle, camera

² Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen ed, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136.

³ Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

⁴ Braudy & Cohen ed., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 137.

movement and photographic effects. All these human interventions are summarised as *mise-en-scène*, a French term originally meaning “having been put into the scene”, which was first applied to the practice of stage direction and then applied to film direction as well.⁵ Therefore, though the pictures are generated through the automatic process of photochemical reproduction, the issues of what to record and how to record it, as well as all the elements which are recorded, are designed through the artificial process of *mise-en-scène*. What is more, human intervention affects not only the level of denotation, but also that of connotation. A house filmed from different angles and in different lights provides the audience with different perceptions of the space and shape, and also creates different atmospheres and emotions. A woman’s face appearing behind a barred window can connote a trapped woman (physically or mentally). From this technical and practical aspect, the pictures do not give the object, they express it. This is “cinematographic language” in Metz’s term.⁶ He argues that the art of film is located on the same semiological “plane” as literary art in a semiological approach:

The properly aesthetic orderings and constraints – versification, composition, and tropes in the first case; framing, camera movements, and light “effects” in the second – serve as the connoted instance, which is superimposed over the denoted meaning. In literature, the latter appears as the purely linguistic signification, which is linked, in the employed idiom, to the units used by the author. In the cinema, it is

⁵ David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 75.

⁶ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 92.

represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the soundtrack.⁷

Metz further distinguishes the **shot** from the word, because a shot “always refers to reality or a reality (even when it is interrogative or jussive)”⁸. Thus, the shot is “a unit of discourse”, “like the statement”: “The image of a house does not signify “house”, but “Here is a house”.⁹ Roland Barthes points out photographs are produced mechanically, so that photographs have an authenticity which writing cannot match.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the image is not the reality but the analogical reproduction of it. These “imitative” arts project two messages: “a *denoted* message, which is the analogue itself, and a *connoted* message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it.”¹¹ Stuart Hall argues that the film sign is an “iconic sign”¹², in which reality exists outside language but is constantly mediated by and through language. “Since the visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot, of course, *be* the referent or concept it signifies.”¹³

Moreover, the filmic denotation *per se* is constructed, organised and codified, because a film is composed of many photographs through montage and its myriad consequences. The same set of photographs linked in different orders and with different rhythms can tell a completely different story and generate an utterly different atmosphere.

⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 85.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 17.

¹² Charles Peirce’s terminology, “Speculative Grammar”, in *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931), 58. Quoted from Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 131.

¹³ Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 131.

And meaning can also be created out of pictures by means of the link of two unrelated pictures; for example, the linkage of a picture of wedding and one of funeral can connote that the marriage is miserable. Of course, this association does not create an exclusive or closed connotation. In a word, meaning is generated not only in the photos but also in the way they are linked. Barthes argues that the cinematic image does not have completeness, because the photograph in the cinema “is impelled, ceaselessly drawn toward other views”.¹⁴ In Metz’s words,

[I]t is the syntagmatic considerations that are at the centre of the problems of filmic denotation. Although each image is a free creation, the arrangement of these images into an intelligible sequence – cutting and montage – brings us to the heart of the semiological dimension of film. ... While no image ever entirely resembles another image, the great majority of narrative films resemble each other in their principal syntagmatic figures.¹⁵

Through the semiological studies of film, Metz concludes that cinema can be considered as language.¹⁶ On the other hand, he argues that cinema is not a language system (or *langue* in semiotic terms), because “it contradicts three important characteristics of the linguistic fact: a language is a *system of signs* used for *intercommunication*”¹⁷.

Whether film is a language system or not is less important for the arguments in this thesis. At least, I agree that film is a language and filmic signs are coded signs – even if

¹⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 89.

¹⁵ Metz, *Film Language*, 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

their codes work differently from those of other signs.¹⁸ Certainly, the filmic signs construct the meanings and the statements. Moreover, these meanings and statements exist only within what Foucault terms a definite **discursive formation**:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* ... The conditions to which the elements of this division (objects, mode of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected we shall call the rules of formation. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division.¹⁹

Foucault further argues that “[a] statement belongs to a discursive formation as a sentence belongs to a text ... the regularity of statement is defined by the discursive formation itself”.²⁰ Discourse, in Foucault’s approach, consists of “a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formations”²¹. It is “merely representation itself represented by verbal signs”²², it is “about the production of knowledge through language”²³. What is more, he insists that nothing has any meaning outside of discourse.²⁴

¹⁸ Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 132.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 116-117.

²¹ Ibid., 117.

²² Foucault, *The Order of Thing*, 82.

²³ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest”, in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. S. Hall & B. Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press; Te Open University, 1992), 291.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse”, in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor & Simon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001), 73.

Meaning and meaningful practice is therefore constructed within discourse, and will always change from one culture or one period to another, because things do **not** have in themselves any fixed, final or true meanings, rather we within human cultures make things mean and signify.²⁵ Foucault has not extended his arguments on discourse into the film domain. Nevertheless, if film is a language, and film language composes representation, then film production and its circulation take place in a discursive formation. In other words, filmic representation is also constructed within discourse, according to Foucault's view that "[a]s long as representation goes without question as the general element of thought, the theory of discourse serves at the same time"²⁶.

What is more, discourse is formed by power in a Foucauldian approach:

...if, since the time of the Greeks, true discourse no longer responds to desire or to that which exercises power in the will to truth, in the will to speak out in the true discourse, what, then, is at work, if not desire and power? True discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power...

Thus, only one truth appears before our eyes: wealth, fertility and sweet strength in all its insidious universality.²⁷

In Foucault's opinion, power not only constrains and prevents, but also produces and circulates.

²⁵ Stuart Hall ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London; Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications in association with the Open University, 1997), 61.

²⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 337.

²⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 219-220.

It produces new discourses, new kinds of knowledge (i.e. Orientalism), new objects of knowledge (the Orient), it shapes new practices and institutions.²⁸

Everyone – the powerful and powerless – is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power's circulation.²⁹

From this perspective, the filmic discourse is also produced by power.

Some may argue that if we set up a fixed camera with wide angle lens and leave it alone with rolling film (or tape) for some time (like a traffic surveillance camera), the video recorded by this camera can be regarded as natural and real. Undoubtedly, the camera can record the reality – the objects and events – more or less. However, in Foucault's perspective, things mean something and are "true" only within a specific historical/discursive context.³⁰ Stuart Hall applies Foucault's theories in the media studies sphere to argue that the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented in video works, which is usually called naturalism and realism, "is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the 'real'. It is the result of a discursive practice."³¹ Thus, as soon as the objects and events are re-produced and re-presented (especially being re-presented as an artwork), they are no longer purely natural or real, but artificial to a certain degree. As soon as the video consisting of the shots has meanings, it becomes a representation and a piece of discourse.

²⁸ Hall ed., *Representations*, 261.

²⁹ Hall, "Foucault", 261.

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ Hall, "Encoding/decoding", 132.

With the help of poststructuralism and deconstruction, we know that the chain of signifiers may never lead us to the signified. Barthes, in his essay “The Death of the Author”³², suggests removing the author from reading a text, because the meaning of the text is created – re-constructed or deconstructed – by the readers. Stuart Hall also indicates that the video production structures “do not constitute a closed system”, because “[t]he codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical”.³³ The circulation of filmic discourse is not closed by production. Nonetheless, this thesis focuses on the “composing”, not the “reading” of filmic representation. Through analysing the selected films, I aim to identify the discourse constituted within these filmic representations. In other words, what discourse do these directors represent/construct through their filmic narratives with their female-protagonists?

2.2 Identification through the Filmic Discourse

The concept of identity/identification draws meaning into the semantic fields of sociology, discourse and psychoanalysis. To begin a discussion about identification, I thus must declare my research approach from the offset. Stuart Hall has sorted three concepts of identity on the basis of three notions of the subject:

- 1) *Enlightenment subject*. It is based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason,

³² Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 142-148.

³³ Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 129, 130.

consciousness and action, whose “centre” consists of an inner core...The *essential centre of the self* is a person’s identity.

2) *Sociological subject*. It reflects the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject is not autonomous and self-sufficient, but is formed in relation to “significant others”, who mediate to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabits. Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges *the gap ... between the personal and the public worlds*.

3) *Post-modern subject*. It conceives that there is no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a “moveable feast”: *formed and transformed continuously* in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us.³⁴

The concept of identity deployed in this research is the third one, which is argued in a post-modernist and discursive approach. According to Hall, the discursive approach accepts that identities are never unified but fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different discourses, practices and positions.³⁵ By the same token, he “sees identification as a construction, a process never complete – always ‘in process’”.

It [identification] is not determined in the sense that it can always be “won” or “lost”, sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of

³⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity”, in *Modernity and its Future*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held & Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with the Open University, 1992), 275-277. My summary and emphasis.

³⁵ Hall, “Who Needs Identity?”, 4.

existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency.³⁶

Cultural identity is hence not an essentialist or immanent entity, but a strategic and positional one. What is more, such positional identities are narratives, “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves”³⁷, and can be chosen, played, preformed and continuously adjusted and re-formed. In Hall’s argument, identification is a process of **becoming** rather than **being**. It deals with the questions of “what we might become”, “how we have been represented” and “how we might represent ourselves” rather than the questions of “who we are” or “where we came from”.³⁸ Identification is thus an identity performativity constituted within, not outside representation.

However, representation does not yet have any fixed, final or true meaning, because it is always encoded and decoded within a particular discursive formation in a particular culture and period. When talking about the enunciative function, Foucault declares:

[O]ne cannot say a sentence, one cannot transform it into a statement, unless a collateral space is brought into operation. A statement always has borders peopled by other statements. These borders are not what is usually meant by “context” – real or verbal – that is, all the situational or linguistic elements, taken together, that motivate a formulation and determine its meaning.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

³⁷ Stuart Hall, “Fantasy, Identity, Politics”, in *Cultural Remix: Theories of Politics and the Popular*, ed. Erica Carter, James Donald & Judith Squires (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 66.

³⁸ Hall, “Who Needs Identity?”, 4.

³⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 97.

Meanings constantly change from one culture or period to another. Representation can only enunciate within a specific historical and cultural discourse. Various subjects may produce particular texts, but they operate within the limits of discursive formations of a particular period and culture. In short, it is discourse, not the subject who speaks it, which produces meanings, truth and knowledge. This is one of Foucault's most "outrageous" or radical propositions: "[t]he subject is produced 'as an effect' through and within discourse"⁴⁰, "[t]his subject of discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be subjected to discourse"⁴¹. From this perspective, identities are constructed within discourse. They are produced within specific discursive formations and practices in specific historical and cultural contexts.

If, then, the subject "has no existence"⁴² and certainly no continuous identity, why do we need identities? Foucault believes the subject is produced through discourse in two different senses or places. First, the discourse itself produces the subject, but it also produces a place for the subject.⁴³ On the one hand, discourse determinates the issues such as "who can speak", "what can be spoken", "who is accorded to use this sort of language?", and "who is presumed that what he says is true". On the other hand, we must locate ourselves in a position – the **subject-position** – to become a speaking subject, listening subject, reading subject, and so on. It is only from this subject-position constructed within discourse that the discourse makes most sense and subjects us to its meanings, power and regulation. That is to say, the subject needs to be placed in a subject-position before it is constituted as a subject within discourse. Though the subject

⁴⁰ Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 10.

⁴¹ Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse", 79.

⁴² Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 10.

⁴³ Hall, *Representation*, 56.

is not unified or stable, but fragmented, the subject needs a position to act and speak in the social and cultural world. Though the subject is sutured with several identities which are sometimes even contradictory or unresolved, the subject needs an identity to support the recognition that will constitute it as a subject. Hall has elaborated this need of an identity with a vivid metaphor of a bus:

[I]dentity is like a bus! Not because it takes you to a fixed destination, but because you can only get somewhere – anywhere – by climbing aboard. The whole of you can never be represented by the ticket you carry, but you still have to buy a ticket to get from here to there. In the same way, you have to take a position in order to say anything, even though meaning refuses to be finally fixed and that position is an often contradictory holding operation rather than a position of truth.⁴⁴

In a nutshell, we need to perform an identity to embark on a subject-position in which we have the power to act and **speak**, in spite of the fact that this subject-position is constructed by discourses through their rules of formation and enunciative modalities.

The arguments above illustrate a dialectic and mutual relation between identification and representation. On the one hand, identification is constructed within representation. On the other hand, one needs identity/identification before one can represent something/anything. In that sense, if we apply such conclusion to specific cases of filmmaking, we are able to deduce the mutual function between film directors' identification and their filmic representation. First, the film directors, who desire to speak through their filmic narratives/representation, need identities to provide a subject-position

⁴⁴ Hall, "Fantasy, Identity, Politics", 65-66.

for representation. However, at the same time, within their filmic representation, they construct, or, “perform” their identification.

From this point of view, this research will explore the Chinese post-fifth-generation directors’ identification and its relation with the filmic representations they composed from a discursive approach. As mentioned in Chapter 1, although the post-fifth generation has been active in the film arena for nearly two decades since the early 1990s, they have hitherto never had an agreed name like their predecessors – the famous Fifth Generation. Some of them, like Guan Hu, crave for a name similar to the Fifth Generation through which to obtain the power of the collective. When the title of Guan’s film *Dirt* (头发乱了, Toufa luanle, 1994) appears, a seal of “eighty-seven” (八七, Baqi) appears on the screen simultaneously. In terms of the casting of the film, the production crew mainly consisted of the 1987 BFA students, including the leading actors Kong Lin (孔琳) and Zhang Xiaotong (张小童), the cinematographers Yao Xiaofeng (姚晓峰) and Wu Qiao (吴樵), the art director Wei Xinhua (魏新华). Thus, Guan was highlighting the year 1987 in order to accentuate a group, a collective, which is a conspicuous imitation of the Fifth-Generation filmmakers who were also BFA students in the same year (1983). Some others, like Wang Xiaoshuai, take great pains to deny the Fifth Generation’s influence by emphasising their individuality. However, when one declares “I am different from him”, one has already revealed some relationship with “him”. In any case, it is undeniable that the Fifth Generation and the power brought with this name influenced their successors. However, with the fading of the collective allegories composed by the Fifth Generation, the era of collective narratives in China came to an end. Deprived of

collective identification, these younger directors' identification became a more anxious and more urgent issue. As Zygmunt Bauman discusses:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. "Identity" is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.⁴⁵

Moreover, the economic, political and cultural context in China in the 1990s, when the post-fifth generation emerged, is more complicated and discursive than the period between the 1950s and 1980s, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Facing globalisation and censorship at the same time, the post-fifth generation struggled with several different, usually contradictory, ideologies and values. In that sense, their identities tend to be more fragmented and sutured in contrast with their predecessors. Therefore, their identification is an apposite case for identity study from a post-modernist and discursive approach.

2.3 Gaze and Seduction

Film is a language and film does have its own language consisting of mise-en-scène, montage, dialogue, music, sound effects and other cinematic factors. Film language, thus, can not only compose narrative, but also create a **gaze**. "The gaze" is a technical term that

⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, 19.

originated in film theory in the 1970s, but it is now more broadly used by media theorists to refer both to the ways in which viewers look at images of people in any visual medium and to the gaze of those depicted in visual texts. In film studies or media studies, to gaze implies more than to look at, because “it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze”⁴⁶. Since Laura Mulvey demonstrated how a male gaze mode is formed in mainstream cinema in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, which was published in 1975 and swiftly became one of the most widely cited and anthologised articles in the realm of contemporary film theory, the male gaze has become an essential term in feminist film criticism.

To some extent, Laura Mulvey’s theory is a feminist expansion of the theories of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, both of whom analogise the operation of cinema with that of the dream, from semiological and psychoanalytical perspectives. Metz indicates that film can provide the spectator with an experience of “the impression of reality”⁴⁷. He further explains that the phenomenon that “films have the appeal of a presence and of a proximity”, is related to the impression of reality, “but its basis is first of all psychological”⁴⁸. In other words, “we understand various cinematic structures and phenomena because we have already encountered similar phenomena in the course of our psychic development”⁴⁹. Baudry explains his ideas in plain words in the essay “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema”. By

⁴⁶ Jonathan E. Schroeder, “Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research”, in Barbara B Stern, *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions* (London: Routledge, 1998), 208.

⁴⁷ Metz, *Film Language*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹ Noel Carroll, “Review of *The Imaginary Signifier* by Christian Metz”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, 2 (winter, 1984): 212.

comparing cinema and dream, Baudry argues that the mode of looking in a film is simulated to dreaming:

The cinematographic apparatus reproduces the psychical apparatus during sleep: separation from the outside world, inhibition of motoricity; in sleep, these conditions causing an overcathexis of representation can penetrate the system of perception as sensory stimuli; in cinema, the images perceived (very likely reinforced by the setup of the psychical apparatus) will be over-cathected and thus acquire a status which will be the same as that of the sensory images of dream.

It is evident that cinema is not dream: but it reproduces an impression of reality, it unlocks, releases a cinema effect which is comparable to the impression of reality caused by dream. The entire cinematographic apparatus is activated in order to provoke this simulation: it is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, a position of the subject, a subject and not reality.⁵⁰

“[D]ream is a hallucinatory psychosis of desire”⁵¹, according to Baudry’s summary of Freud, in which “the object of desire (the object of need), if it happens to be lacking, can at this point be hallucinated”⁵². As with dreams and hallucinations, cinema offers us powerful but illusory perceptions (sound, images, darkness, movement) which give an access to unconscious desires and fantasies. Metz insists that “cinema has its roots in certain unconscious phenomena, notably: imaginary identification, voyeurism, fetishism

⁵⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema”, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen, 221, 222.

⁵¹ Ibid., 215.

⁵² Ibid.

and disavowal”⁵³. Via identification with the all-powerful sight of the camera, the spectator enters the realm of desire and fantasy. Cinema thus offers its viewer – the filmic spectator – a powerful and eroticised gaze.

Employing semiological and psychoanalytical theories, Mulvey makes the point that cinema can construct a perfect fantasy-world for both voyeuristic looking and narcissism, “in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at”⁵⁴. She further argues that in mainstream cinema, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”⁵⁵. Ever since Griffith invented the close-up to capture his leading lady’s (his favourite star, Lillian Gish) beauty in greater detail⁵⁶, “a disjuncture appeared between the image of woman on the screen enhanced as spectacle and the general flow of narrative continuity organising the action”⁵⁷. Woman are displayed and eroticised as sexual beings for the male gaze. Film language produces a gaze model of women’s to-be-looked-at-ness and men’s voyeurism and fetishism.

Though I do not analyse films from a feminist approach, Mulvey’s conception of the male gaze is important for this thesis which focuses on the female images in narrative films. The first issue I need to probe is whether or not, when a female protagonist (or more than one) is placed in a position of agency, she avoids the to-be-looked-at-ness – her objectification as spectacle according to the masculine structure of the gaze. Before

⁵³ Carroll, “Review of *The Imaginary Signifier*”, 212.

⁵⁴ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, “Defence and Illustration of Classical Cinema”, in *Godard on Godard*, ed. Tom Milne (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 28. Quoted from Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: British Film Institute, 1996), 40.

⁵⁷ Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 41.

my arguments, I must clarify that I only consider whether the directors eroticise female images for male gaze when they encode their filmic narrative, but cannot draw the conclusion whether the male gaze actually exists when they are decoded by the film spectators, because, just as Stuart Hall notes, the encoding and decoding is often asymmetrical⁵⁸.

There have already been many studies about the male gaze in narrative films with female protagonists directed by men, such as, Ann E. Kaplan's "Patriarchal and the Male Gaze in Cukor's *Camille*"⁵⁹ and Mary Ann Doane's "*Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence*"⁶⁰, to name a few by top scholars. However, I am more interested in examining the male gaze in so-called "women's films", particularly the films telling women's stories made by female directors. The findings will have two possible conclusions: women are or are not displayed as sexual beings for the male gaze in women's film. Then two questions will follow. 1) How do female directors avoid the male gaze? 2) Why do female directors provide the male gaze? The first question will be discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, in which three women's films all show an obvious tendency to avoid the traditional male spectatorship. In Chapter 5, I will focus on the second issue while analysing Xu Jinlei's *A Letter from An Unknown Woman* (一个陌生女人的来信, Yige moshengnvren de laixin, 2005) in which the sexual appeal of woman is magnificently displayed on the screen.

⁵⁸ Hall, "Encoding/decoding", 130.

⁵⁹ Ann E. Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 36-48.

⁶⁰ Sue Thornham ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 70-82.

However, the gaze and its mutual nature, in a cultural studies approach, actually reflect the power structures – the nature of the relation between the gazer and the gazed-at object. Thus, Mulvey's male gaze reveals the cultural power relation between two sexes on the basis of sexual difference in patriarchal society as reflected by a certain category of films, namely, Hollywood mainstream films. To restate my opinion, I examine the male gaze in these films not to compare women's social and cultural position with men's, but, rather, to probe how these women, who are usually regarded as the weaker group and the second sex, empower themselves through their filmic narratives of women's stories. In other words, I probe how these female directors identify themselves through their filmic gaze.

Foucault, not following conventional feminist thinking, never spoke of 'male domination'; instead, he usually spoke of power as if it subjugated everyone equally. In his opinion, body, no matter whether it belongs to a man or a woman, is represented as a machine by disciplinary practices. According to him, the representation of sexuality is actually a power game. From this perspective, the issue of whether these female directors avoid or create male gazes whilst portraying their female protagonists can be considered as a discursive strategy through which they obtain the power to speak, or, in Foucault's words, obtain "the speaker's benefit"⁶¹. In other words, the filmic gaze is also constituted into a discursive formation. If it rejects a male gaze, it represents a woman's rebellious discourse. Conversely, if it provides a male gaze, it represents a woman's docile discourse. However, both of them emphasise female sexuality, that is, femininity. I summarise three approaches to femininity in filmic discourse as following:

⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 6.

1) *Displaying women's bodies*. If the male directors capture women's bodies through their camera lens for their voyeuristic and fetishist desire, does it mean that the female directors who have no sexual desire for women's bodies (except if they are lesbians) are not interested in portraying women's bodies? The answer is negative. The fact is that quite a few female directors like to repeatedly portray women's beauty in great aesthetical detail. Some like Michelle Citron regard it as a compromise for entering mainstream narrative filmmaking.⁶² Some others like Mulvey believe that "there is pleasure in being looked at"⁶³ and attribute it to narcissism, which is usually considered as a feminine characteristic rather than a masculine one. As Simone De Beauvoir indicates:

The fact is that narcissism is a well-defined process of identification, in which the ego is regarded as an absolute end and the subject takes refuge from himself in it.But it is true that conditions lead woman more than man to turn towards herself and devote her love to herself.⁶⁴

However, all of the opinions mentioned above presume women to be in the passive position in the social and psychoanalytic dimensions. Then, is it possible for us to put this assumption aside so that we may examine the female directors' display of women's bodies from another point of view? To display women's beauty, to highlight female sexual appeal, to be gazed at, if we

⁶² Michelle Citron, "Women's Film Production: Going Mainstream", in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 57.

⁶³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 16.

⁶⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 641.

consider it as women's positive and rational choice (if women are capable of making positive and rational choice), is an intended parade of femininity. If the power of gaze is mutual between the gazer and the gazed at, then to-be-gazed-at can be a process of empowerment too.

2) *Portraying women's tears.* Women love depicting women's tragedy, which is an evident fact. Whether in literature or film works, female authors show a palpable preference for telling stories of women's suffering, oppression, and dilemma. This is often concluded to be female authors' self-consciousness of their own sex/gender. I agree that women directors' consideration of women's situation and feeling can be, at the very least, partially attributed to their female self-consciousness. However, it is also a channel through which they obtain access to feminine discourse, "for women tears symbolised 'deep femininity'"⁶⁵. If displaying women's bodies objectivises women as sexual beings for a male erotic gaze, by the same token, portraying women's tears objectivises women for a male psychological gaze.

3) *Emphasising women's rebellion.* Besides sentimental discourse, some other women directors choose rebellious discourse to tell women's stories. In male-centred narrative films, female characters, though not leading the storytelling, are often endowed with relatively important tasks either for filmic narrative or for filmic spectatorship. By contrast, the images of male characters in many women's films are negligible and extremely pale – they are excluded not only

⁶⁵ Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 20.

from a position of a gaze agent, but also from the filmic narrative, and even from the position of to-be-gazed at. Through totally eliminating men's intervention, women directors achieve a filmic narrative "all about women" so as to emphasise the "sex of women", their own sex and their filmic discourse. Conversely, men directors do not need to reject women in their filmic narrative while representing a dissentient and rebellious discourse. To a great degree, women's gestures of rebellion, which are frequently against men and patriarchy, are actually a feminine representation.

To speak, one needs an identity first. When talking about the relation between identification and assumption of sex, Judith Butler argues:

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of "sex", and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge.⁶⁶

According to Bulter, to identify oneself as a woman is not to state "I am a woman", but, rather, to state "I am NOT a man". To highlight femininity, women directors achieve their sex/gender identification and hence place themselves on a subject-position as women. Simultaneously, they get access to use/play the feminine discourse. Since Foucauldian theories have not particularly considered the issue of femininity power particularly, I will use Baudrillard's theory about the power of seduction, as a supplement in this thesis. Baudrillard suggests that the power of masculinity and that of femininity function reversibly: "Masculinity has always been haunted by this sudden reversibility

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

within the feminine. Seduction and femininity are ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning and power”⁶⁷. Here, masculinity and femininity are not considered as sex divisions, but as power forms. Therefore, femininity is not immanent or determined within sex or sexuality, but is something that can be performed, played and used, as Baudrillard says:

A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of psychic or psychological relations, nor those of repression and unconscious, but must be interpreted in terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances – that is, the terms of seduction. A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of structures and dialectical oppositions, but implies a seductive reversibility – a universe where the feminine is not what opposes the masculine, but what seduces the masculine.⁶⁸

What is more, Baudrillard indicates that seduction is stronger than power and sexuality, because “it is reversible and mortal”, while “power seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal”, and “sexuality must never be confused”⁶⁹.

Therefore, the sex/gender identification of women, who are usually considered as the second sex, the subaltern, and the Other, is itself a process of empowerment. By labelling the femininity and appearing weak, women directors manage to empower themselves with the power of seduction.

On the other hand, if we put aside the sex issue, do women gaze at women through the camera lens? If “the mutuality or non-mutuality of the gaze of the two parties can tell

⁶⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 46, 47.

us who has the right and/or need to look at whom”⁷⁰, reciprocally, can empowerment be generated through constructing a gaze? As Joshua Meyrowitz notes:

[A] person of high status often has the right to look at a lower status person for a long time, even stare him or her up and down, while the lower status person is expected to avert his or her eyes⁷¹.

Therefore, to gaze is a means of identification, too. When a woman director is gazing at another woman through the camera lens, she at the same time differentiates herself from that woman she is gazing at. As Hall suggests, “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference”⁷². Through the filmic gazing, and through this repudiation, she constitutes her identity with which to speak, and endows herself with a discursive position. I will specially discuss this issue when analysing Li Yu’s films.

2.4 Masquerade Play of Identities

The filmic look, undoubtedly, is an essential ingredient of film language. However, the concept of filmic *look* and that of *gaze* are always interlaced with each other in media and film studies approaches. Some theorists make a distinction between the gaze and the look: they suggest that *the look* is a perceptual mode open to all, whilst *the gaze* is a mode of viewing reflecting a gendered code of desire.⁷³ Here it should be noted that the

⁷⁰ Catherine Lutz & Jane Collins, “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes: The Example of *National Geographic*”, in *Visualizing Theory*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994), 373.

⁷¹ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 67.

⁷² Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, 4.

⁷³ Caroline Evans & Lorraine Gamman, “The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing”, in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, ed., Paul Burston & Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 16.

concepts of filmic look and gaze are different in this research: the filmic look refers to all the perceptual *looks* created by the camera lens and the links between the shots; the filmic gaze, by contrast refers especially to the *looks* which signal the psychological relationships of power (including the sex/gender code) between the viewer and the viewed. As I have mentioned, I try to adopt a gender-neutral standpoint in this research. What I probe is not the power relation between two sexes/genders, but how the post-fifth-generation filmmakers identify themselves through constructing their filmic representations within a particular historical and cultural discourse. Therefore, when analysing the films directed by men, I will not focus on the issue of the “male gaze” which implies the inequality between men and women, but, rather, use the term “filmic look” in which the “male gaze” is certainly partly involved.

Several key forms of look can be identified in filmic texts. They are characterised by who is the viewer: the spectator’s look, the intra-diegetic look (a character looks at an object in the text), the extra-diegetic look (a textual character looks out of the frame as if at the spectators), the camera’s look and the editorial look (the filmmakers’ look). All these forms of look often interlace with each other because viewers exist in different spaces, for example, an intra-diegetic look can also be a spectator’s and director’s look as well. What is more, an intra-diegetic look usually shows the audience what the director is looking at and what the director wants the audience to look at. Thus, besides the spectators and the director, every single character within the filmic narratives is possible to look, and his/her look is, in most cases, working as an agent for the look of the spectators and director. When a character is doing the looking, he/she is offered a subject-position simultaneously. This subject-position is offered only by the director who

manipulates the camera and the montage. That is to say, the director surrogates to this character his/her own subject-position, at the very least, temporarily – at that very moment when this character is doing the looking. In other words, the director identifies himself/herself with that character at that moment, though this identification is not (and never) fixed or complete. From this perspective, what I will examine within these male directors' films is, exactly, *who is doing the looking* – more specifically, which sex/gender character is offered the viewer position by the director. The discussion here, therefore, does not stop at whether these men erotise the female images as sexual beings, or whether they speak on or from women's standpoint, but, rather, it probes whether they identify themselves with the women protagonists in their filmic narratives. In a nutshell, I propose to probe these male directors' identification through analysing the filmic look within their films.

However, before I start to analyse the filmic look in any particular films, I notice that as soon as the male directors construct a female-led narrative, their self-identification within the filmic representation is “doomed” to be paradoxical (whether they construct a male spectatorship or not). On the one hand, if they position the female protagonist as the bearer of the look, which means that they look at the female images through any men's (or maybe women's) eyes or through the camera lens directly, they simultaneously position the women as the Other in this look. Being looked at (no matter whether this look is eroticised, fetishist, voyeuristic or not), the female protagonists are not offered a subject-position in the filmic look though they are offered the centred position of filmic narrative. In a word, when a male director is looking at the female protagonist, he cannot identify himself with her. On the other hand, if the male director always looks from the

female protagonist's eyes, which means he surrogates his subject-position to her, then where has his original male subject-position gone? It follows that in the female-centred filmic narratives, the male directors' identification is constructed within more fragmented, sutured, and even contradictory discourses in contrast with their female counterparts. If so, why do these men obsessively centre a female protagonist in their filmic narrative at the expense of falling into an identification paradox?

Stuart Hall's argument about identification enlightens me, again, about this issue. In his theories, identification is not "constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal"⁷⁴ as it is understood in common language sense. On the contrary, since identities "emerge within the play of specific modalities of power", they are more "the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity"⁷⁵. That is, identities are constructed through difference rather than resemblance. I have said above that the Chinese post-fifth-generation filmmakers are a group without an agreed "name" hitherto. As a younger generation, they are desperate for identities – more importantly, identities exclusive for them – with which they can speak. Furthermore, the identities in a post-modernist context are positional and strategic ones constructed within representations. According to Hall, identities "are constructed within the play of power and exclusion"⁷⁶. Therefore, the post-fifth generation needs to construct their distinctive identities through composing filmic representations that are very different from the elder generations (especially the famous Fifth Generation) – different

⁷⁴ Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5.

themes, different film languages, different visual styles, different cultural standpoints, different production modes, and maybe, different sex/gender viewpoints. From this perspective, is it possible to consider their choice of female-centred narrative as one of their identification strategies? If identities are “the result of a successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse”, does the female protagonist work as a clasp in this discursive chain? I will intensively discuss this hypothesis when analysing their earlier films (Chapter 6) and those films produced and distributed within an independent production mode.

On the other hand, to centre women in filmic narratives, to a large extent, gives access to the feminine aesthetics, notably as aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception.⁷⁷ That is to say, similar to the female directors mentioned above, these men probably also attempt to present femininity in their films. (Certainly, I will analyse the other factors in their filmic representation, including visual and narrative style as well as the female images, so as to prove this issue while analysing particular cases.) If the feminine aesthetics exhibited in female directors’ artworks comes, at the very least, partially from women’s self-consciousness, then why do these men endeavour to present, construct, or rather simulate femininity?

In my opinion, it is also a power game played with filmic representation and identity performance. As argued in 2.3, femininity and masculinity, as power forms, are no longer determined within the sex/gender. Then, does it mean that men can also present

⁷⁷ When talking about the question “Is there a feminine aesthetic?”, Bovenshen Silvia answered: “Certainly there is, if one is talking about aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception”. Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?”, trans. Beth Weckmueller, *New German Critique* 10 (winter, 1977): 136. Quoted from E. Deidre Pribram ed. *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, 174.

feminine discourse and benefit from it? Here I need to employ again Baudrillard's theories about the power of seduction.

Baudrillard states that nothing is less certain than sex today.⁷⁸ This statement suggests that the power of seduction never belongs to a sex/gender: "the feminine considered not as a sex, but as the form transversal to every sex, as well as to every power, as the secret, virulent form".⁷⁹ Since femininity is a principle of uncertainty, it is where it is itself uncertain, and this uncertainty is greatest in the play of femininity. That is to say, men can also play femininity and seduce with it. We can describe these male directors, who prefer to speak behind women's images, as boundary-crossing transvestites playing with the indistinctness of the sexes, in the sphere of discourse. If so, what they love is to play the game of uncertain signs of sex. As Baudrillard says, "[w]ith them everything is makeup, theatre, and seduction"⁸⁰. Therefore, to study their films with female protagonists is actually to verify that they do play this game of sexual signs/femininity, and to examine how they play it.

What is more, according to Baudrillard, to seduce is to appear and render weak. "We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers.... We seduce with our death, our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us."⁸¹ Besides adopting women's stories, they can carry on to play femininity with other cultural, political, sociological and even biological codes, assuming roles such as the subaltern, the unprivileged, the

⁷⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁸¹ Ibid., 83.

“underground” filmmaker, the perplexed youth, the impotent man/boy, and so forth. I will particularly illustrate this argument in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

Chapter 3

The Raped Women: Is There a Lesbian Statement?

The discussions from Chapter 3 to Chapter 5 are concentrating on the films with female protagonists directed by post-fifth-generation female directors. Chinese acclaimed feminist theorist Dai Jinhua has given an account of the development and changes in Chinese women's films from the Third to the Fifth Generation in her studies of Chinese female directors and their works between 1949 and 1999. The data and analyses in her studies are important resources to this research, especially for comparative analyses, and I will first make a brief review of Chinese women's films based on her researches in 3.1.

This study starts with the films addressing female homosexual themes directed by the post-fifth generation in this chapter. Since the establishment of New China (1949), homosexuality was a topic ignored by the mainland Chinese people, including the socialists, sexologists and artists, until the publication of Li Yinhe's¹ *Their World: a Study of Homosexuality*². As a result, gay and lesbian images were absent in artworks for several decades until the early 1990s when several gay thematic films in Chinese language, such as *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬, Bawangbieji, dir. Chen Kaige, 1993), *East Palace, West Palace* (东宫西宫, Donggong xigong, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996), *Happy Together* (春光乍泄, Chunguangzhaxie, dir. Wong Kar

¹ Li Yinhe is a sociologist, sexologist, and an activist for LGBT rights in People's Republic of China.

² Li Yinhe, *Their World: a Study of Homosexuality* (Shanxi: Shanxi People's Press, 1993). The English title above is cited from the official publication. However, it is noted that the Chinese title (他们的世界——中国男同性恋群落透视) literally means a study of male homosexuality.

Wai, 1997), and *Lan Yu* (蓝字, dir. Stanley Kwan, 关锦鹏, 2001), appeared in front of mainland Chinese audience. Despite the fact that only *Farewell My Concubine* was released in cinemas, the others also spread widely in mainland China via pirate DVDs and caught much attention from the audience there. According to Tze-lan D. Sang's research, "after the total repression and denial the existence of the homosexuality during the Maoist era, lesbianism has been slow to emerge into public discourse in comparison with male homosexuality and remains heavily disparaged".³ Nevertheless, though Chinese-language lesbian films started to appear around 1997 in Taiwan and Hong Kong along with the release of *Murmur of Youth* (美丽在唱歌, Meili zai gechang, dir. Lin Cheng-Sheng, 林正盛, 1997) and *Self Comb* (自梳, Zishu, dir. Cheung Chi Leung, 张之亮, 1997), they are, contrary to the male-gay ones, nearly unknown to most of the mainland Chinese audience. This is partially due to their smaller budget which cannot afford the popular film stars, such as Leslie Cheung (张国荣, Zhang Guorong), Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (梁朝伟, Liang Chaowei), Liu Ye (刘烨) and Hu Jun (胡军), like their male gay counterparts. Consequently, the films with lesbian themes come to the forefront in mainland China about ten years later than *Farewell My Concubine*. The first film made in mainland China touching upon female homosexual issue is *Men and Women*. However, this film, concentrating on a male gay romance, does not elaborate any details of lesbian love. Therefore, only Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* and Dai Sijie's *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* are lesbian films in a true sense, directed by post-fifth-generation directors. Coincidentally, a female and a male director direct them respectively. I hence propose to compare the creation of female homosexual images and depiction of lesbian romance from different gender

³ Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Quoted from Chris Berry's "Book Review: The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-sex Desire in Modern China.", *Comparative Literature*, 56, 3 (2004 summer): 277.

standpoints in these two films.

In terms of the post-fifth generation, Dai Sijie is a discordant case among them. Born in 1950s, he is much older than most other post-fifth-generation directors, who were born in late 1960s or early 1970s. While all the post-fifth-generation directors live in Chinese metropolises, such as Beijing and Shanghai, Dai Sijie lives in Paris and writes in French. Moreover, none of his films have been released in mainland China, although *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* has been released in Hong Kong. Since Dai's age and experience are discordant with other directors studied in this thesis, and Part II focuses on the female directors' films, he and his film are not the main object in this research but are studied merely as a comparative case. Rather than some lesbian-themed films made in Hong Kong or Taiwan, I choose *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* to be the comparative reference for Li Yu's *Elephant and Fish* for the following reasons. Dai's citizenship and experience do tally with the definition of post-fifth-generation filmmaker in this research. Though he has been living in France for more than two decades, he maintains his Chinese nationality. Furthermore, he was already thirty years old when he went to France, and so received a traditional Chinese education and established his foundational understanding of philosophy, value and life in accordance with Chinese ideology and experience. Even though his films have never been screened in Chinese cinemas, many Chinese audiences are interested in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, because of the appealing power of film stars like Chen Kun (陈坤), Liu Ye, Zhou Xun (周迅) and Li Xiaoran (李小冉). And it is not difficult for the mainland Chinese audience to watch them via the circulation of pirated DVDs and internet point-to-point download. Furthermore, the different gender and cultural identities of Dai and Li make their filmic representations of the same theme to be very interesting

and valuable comparative cases. First, I am interested in comparing the filmic representations of lesbian stories composed by a male and a female director. Second, Dai was a writer and director who had already achieved some success and won recognition in the western world and in China when he made *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, whilst Li was an unknown filmmaker struggling to gain recognition in the filmmaking arena when she made *Fish and Elephant*. Given these contrasts, to study how they construct their identification through their filmmaking is significant in this thesis. Moreover, Dai's own ethnical identification between a Chinese and a westerner itself is a special and meaningful case.

Though focusing on lesbian-themed films, I will not eulogise or criticise the selected films from an aggressive homosexual stance in this chapter. When discussing these lesbian-themed films, I am not invoking an essentially lesbian perspective from which these films are made and viewed, but examining how the Chinese post-fifth-generation directors manoeuvre and use the theme and identity of homosexuality. Since the word "lesbianism" is usually related to radical feminism, I hence want to answer the following questions through the analyses of the selected films: is there more female consciousness represented in a lesbian story? Does a lesbian narrative indeed exist in contemporary Chinese cinema? And if it does exist, to what extent can it escape from being politicalised? The word "raped" in the chapter title contains three strata of signification. First, the male director depicts the images of lesbians as eroticized spectacles. Second, both the male and female directors use queer themes, and even the body and desire of a female homosexual, for their own cultural recognition and identification. Third, the representation of the lesbian theme is configured into a revolutionary narrative paradigm in which the objective reality and

the individual feeling of lesbian lives are covered and exploited for a discursive statement.

In 3.3 and 3.4, I will analyse Dai Sijie's *Chinese Botanist's Daughters* and Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* respectively. The filmic presentation of these two films are very different: Dai Sijie endeavours to present a "queer" tone, in contrast with Li who tries to narrate in a documentary realism style. Since "queer" and "real" are characteristics in each of them, I propose to probe their cultural perspectives and the motivations implied in a lesbian romance from these two words. Though the films have dissimilar visual presentation and cultural standpoints, they use the identity and the theme of "the queer" for different purposes. What is more, to some extent, both directors politicalise the same-sex romance. In 3.5, I will argue that they turn a sexual story into a political/revolutionary story eventually, via the creation of the roles of the fathers and the husbands, and then further contest their use of the so-called feminist discourse for their own identification.

3.1 Review of "Women's Film" in Mainland China after 1949

The term "women's film" or "women's cinema" appears in feminist film studies, such as *Notes on Women's Cinema*⁴, "The Woman's Film"⁵ and "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema"⁶, along with the launch of second- wave feminism. It refers to the

⁴ Claire Johnston ed., *Notes on Women's Cinema*, (Britain: the Society for Education in Film and Television, 1972).

⁵ Molly Haskell, "The Woman's Film", in Thornham ed. *Feminist Film Theory*, 20-30.

⁶ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", in Thornham ed. *Feminist Film Theory*, 31-40.

work of women film directors, and can also designate the work of other women behind the camera such as cinematographers and screenwriters. Although the participation of women film editors, costume designers, and production designers is usually not considered to be decisive enough to justify the term “women’s cinema”, it does have tremendous influence on the visual impression of any movie. In China, “women’s film” is usually translated into “Nüxing dianying” (女性电影). However, the definition of “Nüxing dianying” is different from that of “women’s film” in some cases. Some Chinese theorists define “Nüxing dianying” in a narrow sense, specially referring to films which include the following three essential elements: female director, female themes and female consciousness.⁷ According to them, “nüxing dianying” in a narrow sense is a film directed by women, focusing on themes related to women’s lives and experience, narrated from women’s standpoint, expressing women’s emotion and mentality, and delivering a female consciousness.⁸ To avoid conceptual confusion in this thesis, I translate the term “nüxing dianying” in such narrow definition into English as “feminist films” to distinguish it from “women’s films”.

Dai Jinhua has conducted a rather thorough summary on the development of Chinese women’s films from 1949 to 1999 with her essays “Invisible Women”⁹ and

⁷ Guo Zeqing, “The Modern Women’s Films in China, the Existence of Women and Their Future: Take Three Modern Women’s Films for Example (中国当代女性电影、女性生存及未来——以三部当代女性电影为例)”, *Journal of Putian University* 13, 3(2006): 74. All the English translations of the resources original in Chinese are my translation unless otherwise stated. All the original Chinese texts are displayed in footnotes. “女性导演、女性题材和女性意识”三个界定女性电影的维度。

⁸ Zhang Fangming, “Stranding and Breaking Through: A Feminism Explanation to *HongYan*, or A Woman Who Plunges into Spiritual Plight (困境与突围——对电影《红颜》的女性主义读解)”, *Dianying pingjie* 19 (2007), accessed Aug. 3, 2009, <http://qkzz.net/Magazine/1002-6916/2007/19>. 女性电影，即由女性导演的、以女性为主体、表达女性的切身感受，带有鲜明的女性意识。Guo Zeqing, “The Modern Women’s Films in China”, 73. 严格意义上的女性电影应该是“女性写、写女性”，即女性导演创作的，以女性为主角，站在女性的观点诠释有关女性主题的电影。

⁹ Dai Jinhua, “Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women’s Films”, trans. Mayfair

“Gender and Narration”¹⁰. I summarise the female directors and their works during this period owing much to her findings.

Filmmaking in mainland China was a field definitely dominated by male directors until 1949, the year of the establishment of New China. Wang Ping (王苹) was the first Chinese woman director, at the time, the only female one of the Third-Generation directors. Her representative works, such as *The Everlasting Electric Current* (永不消逝的电波, Yongbuxiaoshide dianbo, 1958) and *The Sentinel beneath the Neon Light* (霓虹灯下的哨兵, Nihongdengxiade shaobing, 1964), used to be described as “well-known for their natural, delicate, and lyrical artistic style”¹¹, yet they still represent a strong political utilitarianism. As Dai Jinhua says, the only hint at the gender of Wang Ping and her followers – Wang Haowei (王好为), Guang Chunlan (广春兰), Shi Xiaohua (石小华) and Shi Shujun (石蜀君) – “is the name given as the director of the film, the filmmaker’s ‘signature’”¹².

Around 1987, some women directors began to select materials concerning women, who had been neglected or scorned previously. They tried to construct an experience and a world unique to women from a female perspective, which cannot be found in male narratives. These directors include Wang Junzheng (王君正, e.g. *The First Woman in the Forest* 山林中头一个女人, Shanlinzhong touyige nüren, 1987 and *Women, Taxi, Women* 女人‘Taxi’女人, nüren Taxi nüren, 1990), Qin Zhiyu (秦志钰, e.g. *The Love of the Gingko Tree* 银杏树之恋, Yinxingshu zhilian, 1987, *Miss Julie* 朱丽小姐, Zhuli xiaojie, 1989, and *A Single Woman* 独身女人, Dushen nüren,

Yang, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 3, 1 (1995): 254-280.

¹⁰ Dai Jinhua, “Gender and Narration”, in Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 99-149.

¹¹ Zhu Ma ed., *Handbook of Films* (Sichuan: Department of Chinese of Sichuan University; Sichuan Provincial Film Distribution Corp., 1980).

¹² Dai Jinhua, “Invisible Women”, 271.

1990), Bao Zhifang (鲍芝芳, e.g. *Golden Fingernail* 金色的指甲, Jinsede zhijia, 1988), and Dong Kena (董克娜, *Who is the Third Party?* 谁是第三者, Shuishi disanzhe, 1988 and *The World of Women* 女性世界, Nüxing shijie, 1990). Films created by these women directors represent some characteristics of self-conscious women's films, yet, according to Dai Jinhua, the narrator's gender identity, perspective, and position are all ambiguous and confusing.

It is this type of film, not those which attempt to transcend or conceal the filmmaker's gender position, that brings to prominence with greater clarity the paradox and dilemma of contemporary Chinese women's culture.¹³

While trying to depart from one kind of male discourse and patriarchal norm in narratives, they actually adopt another sort of male-dominated discourse.

At the same time, there is another type of film produced by women that displays the vivid imprint of women's expression and alternative possibilities, such as Zhang Nuanxin's (张暖昕) *The Drive to Win* (沙鸥, Shaou, 1981) and Hu Mei's (胡玫) *Army Nurse* (女儿楼, Nü'erylou, 1984). Not only are women the protagonists, the centre and subject of the narrative perspective in their works, but they also display a "female style" in terms of filmic language and mode. However, Dai argues that "they simply reappropriate female experiences, 'translate' and rewrite them into a female version of the same motifs."¹⁴ In terms of cultural and social motifs, the female styles exhibited in these films are, for the most part, similar to those made by men.

Dai claims that Huang Shuqin's *Human, Woman, Demon* (人·鬼·情,

¹³ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 138.

¹⁴ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 142.

Renguiqing, 1987) is “the first and only ‘feminist film’”¹⁵ during this period, because this film “metaphorically reveals the existential and cultural predicament faced by contemporary Chinese women”¹⁶. Adam Lam also agrees that *Human, Woman, Demon* is a film focuses on women’s life at a general, timeless level.¹⁷

In Dai’s opinion, though contemporary China possesses the most powerful and numerous cohort of women directors in the world,¹⁸ “feminist film” is rare in the first fifty years of New China’s film history. She believes the most primary reason of this lack of female narrative is that the success of women directors was gauged by their ability to produce films that are exactly the same as men’s. The Chinese female directors therefore collectively play a Hua Mulan¹⁹ social role while relegated to being the Second Sex. This model of gender-identity exists throughout the female directors from the Third to the Fifth Generation.

The post-fifth-generation female directors started their filmmaking after 2000, around ten years later than their male counterparts do. Among them, Li Yu, Ma Liwen and Xu Jinglei are the representatives and active role models. Not surprisingly, all of them have their film themes intensively focusing on women. I will analyse films directed by these three female directors in this thesis.

¹⁵ Dai Jinhua, *Notes on Film theories and critics* (Beijing: Scientific and Technological Document Publishing House, 1993), 220.

¹⁶ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 143.

¹⁷ The analysis of *Human, Woman, Demon* is in Adam Lam, *Identity, Tradition and Globalism in Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Feature Films*, 126-131.

¹⁸ In the mainstream film industry, from the establishment of New China to 1995, there are more than thirty women directors have supervised the production of two or more feature-length films, twenty influential women directors work at state-owned film studios, and five or six women directors have won awards at various international film festivals and gained varying degrees of international acknowledgement. Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 133.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva argues that Hua Mulan, the heroine of the Five Dynasties (420-588), is a prototype that has served as a model for many Chinese girls and women who have wished to abandon a strictly feminine role and gain access to the political. Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans., Anita Barrows (New York, London: Marion Boyars, 1986), 93.

Moreover, Dai Jinhua's studies of Chinese women's films and her examination of "feminist films" are based on a conventional premise that women are weak, powerless and oppressed by men. Such a premise is rather biased; this thesis therefore will not stick to the stereotypical gender hierarchy of male domination, but rather parallel the feminine and masculine elements within a power game. Furthermore, the term "feminist" is still a controversial word in this thesis. I therefore will not verify whether these women's films are feminist or not, but retain the name "feminist films" for them at first, and then examine the issues around whether these films deliver female discourse, or, what kind of discourse they represent.

3.2 Synopsis of the Selected Films

Dai Sijie was born in Fujian of China in 1954. During the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to receive re-education in Ya'an (雅安), a rural region of Sichuan (四川) from 1971 to 1974, because he came from an educated middle-class family. After returning from the rural area, he was admitted to Nankai University, studying art history in 1977. In 1984, he left China for France to study art and film. There, he acquired a passion for movies and became a director. Before turning to writing, he made three critically acclaimed feature-length films: *China, My Sorrow* (牛棚, Niupeng, 1989), *Le Mangeur de Lune* (吞月亮的人, Tuanyueliangderen, 1994) and *The Eleventh Child* (第十一子, Dishiyizi, 1998). He wrote and directed a filmic adaptation of his novel in French with the same title, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* released in 2002. The film was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film of Golden Globe in 2003. *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* is his latest film.

The film won Best Artistic Contribution & People's Choice Award in Montréal World Film Festival (2006), and Best Canadian Film or Video in Toronto Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival (2007).

Set in China in the late 1980s or early 1990s, *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* recounts a lesbian romance that occurred in a botanic garden. Li Ming (played by Mylène Jampano) is an orphan whose Chinese father and Russian mother both died in Tangshan earthquake (1976) when she was three. After growing up in an orphanage, she lands a six-weeks internship with Professor Chen (Lin Dongfu, 林栋甫), a leading botanist who takes her in to live on an isolated island with his daughter Ann (Li Xiaoran). As the two young women, Li Ming and Ann, collect plants and care for Chen's herbal gardens, they fall in love in the midst of strikingly beautiful green landscapes. When Professor Chen suggests that Li Ming marry Ann's brother Dan, the lesbian lovers decide that this is the only way for them to stay together, since he is away most of the time in the army. Dan is upset to find out that his bride is not a virgin, but heads back to his Tibetan army soon after the honeymoon. All seems like paradise for the lovers now, but Professor Chen finally senses the romance that occurred under his nose. The end of the film is shocking and controversial. Professor Chen dies from Coronary Heart Disease when he catches the lesbian lovers having sex. As a result of his dying words, the two women are sentenced to death by the court and executed. Though the background of the story is in China, the film was not shot in China, but in Vietnam.

Li Yu is a female director who is usually acclaimed as an artistic or feminist director, due to her preference for themes of marginalised women. Her feature film debut came with *Fish and Elephant*, which is purportedly the first feature ever made

in mainland China addressing a lesbian theme. Before making *Fish and Elephant*, Li Yu had already tangled with Chinese censorship with her independent documentary *Sisters* (姐妹, Jiemei, 1999) addressing female homosexual issues. Although *Fish and Elephant* was eventually banned for cinema release in China, it introduced Li Yu into Chinese filmmaking arena and brought her opportunities to sustain her future filmmaking.

The story follows Xiao Qun (played by Pan Yi, 潘仪), an elephant keeper in Beijing Zoo who maintains an aquarium of fish in her home (hence the two animals in the title). When she is shopping in an indoor market, she meets with Xiao Ling (Shitou, 石头) who runs a small clothes stall and then falls in love with her. Their relationship comes under fire, however, with the arrival of Qun's divorced mother who, unaware that her daughter is lesbian, tries to set her up with a prospective husband. Things get even more complicated by the arrival of Qun's ex-girlfriend Junjun (Zhang Qianqian, 张浅潜), who is now wanted by the police for killing her abusive father. To protect Junjun, Qun hides her in the zoo, which arouses Ling's suspicion and jealousy. Heart-broken, Ling poisons Qun's fish and leaves her home. During the days of looking for Ling, Qun is invited to have dinner with her mother. Qun confesses her homosexuality while her mother tells her that she has decided to marry Mr. Zhang, the man who is supposed to be matched with Qun. Eventually, Ling is reconciled with Qun after they clear up the misunderstanding about Junjun. When they are making love crazily, Junjun is found and besieged by the police.

3.3 Is It Queer?

Before analysing these two films, I must mention a term which is usually mentioned in the studies of films on homosexual themes, New Queer Cinema. It is “the name given to a wave of queer films that gained critical acclaim on the festival circuit in the early 1990s”.²⁰ In 1992, *Sight and Sound* magazine printed an article, “New Queer Cinema”²¹ by North American Feminist and critic B. Ruby Rich. Rich recounts her experiences of, and reflections upon, the strong gay presence on the previous year’s film festival circuit, and effectively coins the phrase “New Queer Cinema” in this article. The term does not contain all the films that concern homosexuality, but refers to those that are radical in form and aggressive in their espousal of sexual identities, films that challenged both the hetero-normative status quo and the promotion of positive images of male and female gays that had been advocated by the homosexual liberation movement.

In this section, I will not discuss whether Dai Sijie’s *The Chinese Botanist’s Daughters* belongs to New Queer Cinema or not, because the issue of whether the director shares a standpoint with homosexual-orientated people is not one emphasised in this thesis. Instead, what interests me is how Dai Sijie constructs a queer thematic film to underpin his cultural perspective. In addition, I also try to probe the discursive structure between men and women, west and east, masculinity and femininity represented in his filmic narrative. Through analysing the visual elements and plot design in *The Chinese Botanist’s Daughters*, I find that Dai Sijie fabricates an illusory context for the queer story. Though he narrates in a realistic tone, the art design of the

²⁰ Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction”, in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michel Aaron (New Brunswick, N.J.:Rutgers University Press, 2004), 3.

²¹ B. Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema”, *Sight and Sound* 2, 5 (1992): 32.

scenes, the locations and the costumes are artificial, and the plot development is unconvincing. In short, belonging to Queer Cinema or not, the visual presentation of this film is really “queer”.

Admittedly, the visual world created by Dai is fascinating. He places most scenes on an isolated island, a heavenly arboretum filled with diverse and fascinating plants. Nevertheless, both the buildings on the island and the decoration inside present a tendency of “back to the ancients”: the ancient wooden house, the hanging bridge embellished with lanterns, the walls with charming patterns, the poles with couplets written by brush calligraphy, the pierced windows, the lamps made of coloured glaze, the green beaded curtains, and so forth. The costumes of the female protagonists, especially those of Ann, are also captivating. She appears either in ethnic clothes or simply wrapped in a piece of red velvet after a bath. All these things set a tone of aestheticism, a Utopia. According to Li Ming’s voice-over at the beginning of the film, her parents died in Tangshan earthquake occurred in 1976 when she was three years old. Thus the story in which she is about eighteen years old should happen in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the scenes and costumes in antique flavour offer no correct temporal information. As Xiang Yu indicates, “[e]verything on the island is so antique that is out of line with the outside world in terms of time.”²² In one word, Dai Sijie intends to form a disordered context of this lesbian romance. He alienates the story from the real world, because neither of them is the emphasis in his filmic narrative. What he wants to display is China, Chinese beauty, and beautiful Chinese lesbians, more specifically, to those in the western imagination. Then the film, including the

²² Xiang Yu, “An Analysis of the Cultural Perspectives of Overseas Chinese Film Directors (试论海外华人电影导演的文化立场)”, *Dangdai wentan* 6 (2008): 101-105, accessed Dec. 10, 2009, <http://qkzz.net/magazine/1006-0820/2008/06/3171761.htm>. 岛上的一切都十分古旧，仿佛在时间上与外界脱节。

narration and the visual presentation of it, falls unavoidably into a contradictory chaos and ridiculous dilemma.

Undeniably, thirty years' life experience in China is a unique writing tool for Dai Sijie who writes and makes films in France. After struggling in the Western cultural arena for almost twenty years, Dai has long realised and benefited from playing the card of Chineseness. The title of the film shown on the screen (on in other media), namely *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, has already started the game. If we erase "Chinese" from the title, its hint of a lesbian story, or at least, a women's story is still conceivable. It is seemingly unnecessary to highlight the national flavour of such a love story. However, the director marks **Chinese** in the title, because it is a crucial selling point in the West. Furthermore, the entire film proves that Dai Sijie is an expert in playing his card of "Chineseness".

First, he uses various visual elements to elaborate an exotic fairyland. Whatever the pastoral landscape or the exquisite props, the ethnic ceremony or the reserved beautiful Chinese girls, all bathe the story in a fascinating and sexy atmosphere. The green beaded curtain appearing repeatedly is a foregrounded prop: the beaded curtain swinging with silvery sound presents exoticism and implies the nebulous sexual ardour at the same time (Figure 3-3-1). In this dream-like fairyland far away from their living environment, the western audience are able to unleash their sexual imagination. Li Lin indicates that the Chinese lesbian thematic films collectively beautify and romanticise the love story on the surface: "indulging in creating romantic sceneries and idealistic Utopia instead of exploring the emotional conflicts and women's mental world."²³ In this sense, Dai's pursuit of aestheticism even touches

²³ Li Lin, "An Analysis of the Paradox in Chinese Lesbian Films (试论话语女同性恋电影的书写悖

the edge of the absurd. For example, as shown in Figure 3-3-2, each time when Ann is sleeping, she lies in a posture which is designated as “Spring Sleep” (春睡, Chunshui). It was a popular photography posture for the prostitutes in Shanghai in the 1930s, originally evolved from Titian’s “Venus of Urbino” (ca. 1538, Figure 3-3-3).²⁴ Admittedly, the picture captures the beautiful curve of the woman’s body in a glance. But when one of my friends, whose occupation has nothing to do with film, saw this picture, she remarks amusedly: “Doesn’t she feel tired (sleeping with such a pose)!?” Dissimilar to most western films addressing sexual topic that portray women’s bodies straightforwardly, Dai artfully hides the “crucial part” of Ann’s body with a cloth and her arm. In erotising Chinese women’s bodies into sexual objects, Dai inherits the spirit of “implicit beauty” (含蓄美, Hanxumei) from Chinese traditional aesthetics. Although it is a sexual story, he avoids portraying sex candidly. Rather than depicting the scene of making love, the director is seemingly interested much more in depicting girls’ bathing. Whether portraying their shower in the mountain or having a sauna in the greenhouse, he insists on artificial cinematography and mise-en-scene – extreme close-ups of partial body, short takes, half-hidden naked bodies, artificial lighting and colour tone, and so forth. He fills the bathing scenes with sensual flavour through these filmic techniques, but the actual sexual content is skipped over. More specifically, Dai never describes the sex between two women in this film, not beyond some vague depiction of them embracing and kissing. It is as if the specific portrayal of the Chinese women having sex will destroy the sexual imagination of the western audience immediately.

论)” *Dangdai Wentan* 2 (2009): 116-120, accessed Dec. 10, 2009, <http://qkzz.net/magazine/1006-0820/2008/06/3171761.htm>. 迷恋于制造浪漫的外在景观,疏忽了刻画真实的内心世界;醉心于涂抹唯美的理想色彩,遗忘了描摹深刻的情感挣扎。

²⁴ Zhang Yingjin mentions this posture in his “Prostitution and Urban Imagination: Negotiating the Public and Private in Chinese Films of the 1930’s”, in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1973*, ed. Zhang Yingjin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 173-174.



Figure 3-3-1



Figure 3-3-2



Figure 3-3-3

What is more, politics is an unavoidable card in the game of constructing imaginary China. Besides the exotic scenery and beauty, the political status of the Third World is an even more interesting spectacle to the West. “What the west would like to see is the China which is still struggling in fatuous cultural and dark despotism.

Thus, to a great extent, Dai Sijie's critical presentation of China is to greet the ideology of western-centralism."²⁵ It is embodied undeniably within the unconvincing plot arrangement, especially the ending. At the end of the film, the two lesbians are condemned to death. The final court verdict is as:

The last words of Professor Chen tell us that, what kills him is not Coronary Heart Disease, but another kind of terrible disease, that is, homosexuality. ... A sexual perversion of love involving a same-sex couple leads to the death of a famous Chinese botanist. Chen An'an and Li Ming cannot escape responsibility and the punishment for this offence.²⁶

In the 1990s China, to sentence somebody to death because he/she has infuriated someone to death is not only implausible but also absurd. It is hard to convince me that Dai Sijie has no idea about Chinese reality in the 1990s. As mentioned above, what he aims to display is not a real China but a China of the western imaginary. To him, it is therefore not a ridiculous mistake but a sort of strategy. This is because Queer Cinema, as Amy Taubin powerfully argues, 'is figured in terms of sexual desire and the desire it constructs is exclusively male'.²⁷ In this manner, Dai Sijie, a male director, "rapes" the lesbian roles in the film from two strata. First, he eroticises the lesbian women for male fetishist and voyeuristic visual pleasure. Second, he objectivises the Chinese women to cater to a western exotic gaze – a typical orientalist

²⁵ Xiang Yu, "An Analysis of the Cultural Perspectives of Overseas Chinese Film Directors". 一个在文化上愚昧落后、在政治上专制黑暗的中国形象在西方无疑是受欢迎的。戴思杰电影对中国的批判性再现,在很大程度上就是对这种西方中心主义的迎合。

²⁶ Lines in the film. 陈教授临死之前留下的证词告诉我们: 杀死他的不是冠心病, 而是另一种更可怕的疾病.....这个病的名字就叫同性恋。.....一桩畸形的同性的爱情发生, 导致我国著名植物学家的死亡, 陈安安李明罪责难逃。

²⁷ Amy Taubin, "Beyond the Sons of Scorsese", in *American Independent Cinema*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 91.

gaze in Said's terms²⁸. If I change the word "male" into "the privileged" in Taubin's argument, the power relation underpinning this Chinese **Queer** Cinema will be more apparent.

However, while playing the Chineseness card in western world, Dai Sijie's cultural identity is complex. On the one hand, he exploits his "insider" identity with his personal experience in China. On the other, in terms of cultural standpoint, he self-identifies with the western intellectuals. That is to say, Dai takes up the identity of a western saviour and at the same time an eastern trafficker selling the imagination of China. In this sense, it is understandable why he chooses a Russian half-caste, Li Ming, as one of the female protagonists, although her mixed blood identity is meaningless insofar as the story per se. To some extent, Li Ming, a woman having the signature face of the White, plays the role of the western gazer and saver.

First, Li Ming functions as a gaze agent. From the beginning of the film launched with her voice-over, the camera lens keeps catching sight of the island, Professor Chen and Ann from her point of view. In her eyes, the semi-isolated island is a strange and secret land, and Ann is a mysterious beauty (It is so similar to the eastern lands where western colonists first disembarked.). Though committing to a love/sexual story between two women, Dai does not treat the two roles equally without discrimination but shows more interest in illuminating Ann's body. The scenes of Ann sleeping in the greenhouse are shot in a classical fetishistic and voyeuristic portrayal mode: a fairy-like half-naked woman lying in obscure light and rising steam constructs an erotic picture of a "sleeping fairy". The artistic conception instead of the plot becomes the main content of the filmic "looking". What is more,

²⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

Dai eroticises Ann's body from Li Ming's point of view, that is, in her gazing. The following series of shots are a typical demonstration of such a gaze (Figure 3-3-4):

1. Ann's bare feet;
2. Ann's half-length portrait when sweat highlighting her bust;
3. close-up of Li Ming whose eyes are gazing at Ann;
4. Ann's full-length portrait shot over Li Ming's shoulder.



Figure 3-3-4

The editing of the shots demonstrates the gaze relation between these two women: Li Ming is the gazer whilst Ann is the gazed at. What is more, the camera repeatedly describes such a gaze (Figure 3-3-5), especially in the bathing/sexual scenes. Therefore, though the story occurs in a same-sex scenario, the director constructs a hierarchical gaze relationship by empowering one of them to be the gazer whilst eroticising the other as a sexual object. The underlying power relation between the West and the East is conspicuous enough.

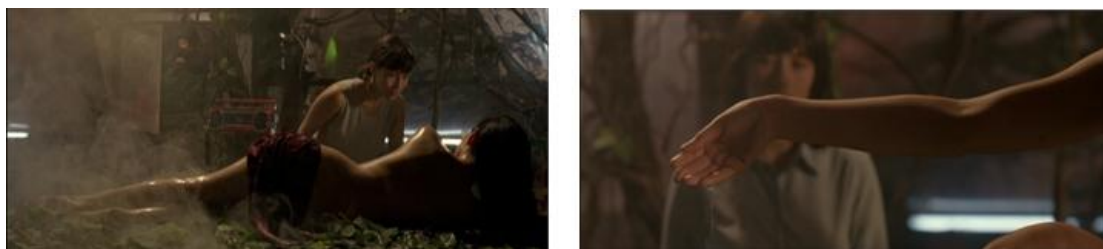


Figure 3-3-5

Besides serving as a gaze agent, the character of Li Ming performs as Ann's enlightener, unveiling the oppression caused by her father/family/nation and also as Ann's saviour, rescuing her out of purgatory with her opening arms. Li Ming, the interloper on the island, opens Ann's eyes, ignites her desire, struggles with her rigid and selfish father, and eventually brings her hope for the future. Ann is verbalising this when she says: "I was extremely lonely before you came. But the loneliness has never come back since you were here."²⁹ Then Li Ming responds: "Come with me. We go away to a distant place and will never be apart from each other."³⁰ When criticising Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, Xiang Yu indicates, "What Dai tells is not a love story, but a story about how the western culture enlightens and occupies the East."³¹ In my opinion, Dai continues this story in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, merely replacing the heterosexual love story in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* with a homosexual one. Nevertheless, once Ann falls in love with Li Ming, she immediately betrays her father/family/nation/culture. She refuses to cook her father's favourite food, duck feet, because Li Ming does not like it. In order to stay with Li Ming, she even ignores her brother's happiness that promotes the marriage between Li Ming and him, despite being very clear about the

²⁹ Lines in the film. 你来之前，我很孤单，孤单得可怕。你来之后，就再也没有孤单的感觉了。

³⁰ Lines in the film. 我们一起远走高飞，永远不分开。

³¹ Xiang Yu, "An Analysis of the Cultural Perspectives of Overseas Chinese Film Directors". 从这个意义上来说，影片所讲述的就不仅仅是一个爱情的故事，而是一个西方文化如何启蒙或者说占有东方的故事。

fact that Li Ming has no feeling for him whatsoever. When Ann meets Li Ming, when the East meets the West, western ideology makes a clean sweep. As Xiang Yu argues, “[t]he East loses without any suspense that the existence of the conflict is even nearly unnoticeable, because the East is so longing for and fascinated by the West.”³²

In conclusion, Dai demystifies the “queer flavour” of lesbian romance narrative: demoded visual elements, contradictory scenes and a ridiculous plot. He falls into a logical paradox because of his paradoxical cultural identification. On the other hand, he does not care at all about the logical mistakes in the film, because what he exerts himself to tell is not a realistic story but a “queer” story taking place in a fictitious China. The female protagonists’ identity of “the queer”, which is (at least, in the Western imagination) controversial in China, is just an essential card in his exhibition of a “queer” China. He chooses them because “‘queer’ is most compelling, I think, when it signifies a ‘making strange’, odd or controversial.”³³ Nonetheless, while exhibiting his unique experience in China (within the French filmmaking arena), he wants to avoid being objectivised as the Other. He puts in place a gaze agent to state his western cultural standpoint, and yet softens this western gaze by using the eyes of a woman (a mixed blood lesbian woman). As a result, Dai Sijie eventually structures a filmic discourse with two self-contradictory cultural approaches. The film is queer, so what? The queer is meant to be queer.

³² Ibid. 这种冲突毫无悬念地以东方的失败告终,以至几乎可以说不存在冲突,因为西方让东方如此向往和陶醉。

³³ Anat Pick, “New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films”, in Michel Aaron ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, 105.

3.4 Is It Real?

In terms of production, *Fish and Elephant* is an independent film³⁴ in all aspects. Cooperating with producer Cheng Yong, Li Yu raised the production funding (400,000RMB) so as to produce the film without any official support. Technically, the production of *Fish and Elephant* is crude in many aspects, not just in terms of cinematography and postproduction. The entire film is cast with non-professional actors and all scenes are shot on location with natural light. The director even omitted rehearsing before shooting some scenes.³⁵ However, these economical and efficient methods of production simultaneously form a documentary realism of the filmic narrative. Li Nan claims that *Fish and Elephant* is “a feature with a documentary coat”: “The plot of the film is trivial, being similar to the presentation of real life, so that Li Yu is rather a looker-on than the creator of the story.”³⁶ Cui Zi'en, a film director, film scholar, screenwriter, novelist and outspoken queer activist based in Beijing, also applauds for this film. In his words,

Though the story lines of the film look complicated, the director has handled them naturally without any ostentation, exaggeration or accentuation. The simple and straightforward mise-en-scene and editing shape the film's

³⁴ The definition of “independent film” is different in different countries. In China, “independent film” refers to the films which are produced without any government funding. A detailed discussion is in chapter 7.

³⁵ In an interview, Li Yu said that she did not give scripts to the actors, so that they can perform freely before shooting some scenes. Zhou Yuhong, “An Introduction and Critique of the First Lesbian-Themed Film in Mainland China (中国史上首部女同性恋主题影片)”, accessed Nov. 22, 2009, <http://www.menggang.com/movie/china/liyu/fishelephnt/fishelephnt-a.html>.

³⁶ Li Nan, “The Director of *Fish and Elephant* Pours out the difficulty in Telling Homosexual Story (想喊声“同志”并不容易：《今年夏天》导演诉说苦衷)”, accessed Nov. 22, 2009, <http://gb2.chinabroadcast.cn/1015/2003-11-24/169@347424.htm>. 这部电影的情节显得凌乱，更像对一种生活状态的真实呈现。就《今年夏天》而言，与其说李玉是个创作者，倒不如说她是个旁观者更合适。

characteristic of purity.³⁷

I summarise the realistic characteristics in the production of this film as the following:

1. shot on location;
2. shot with natural light;
3. long takes and motionless cinematography;
4. non-professional actors, especially, the use of instinctive actors – the real lesbians play as lesbians, real lovers play as lovers;³⁸
5. no rehearsal;
6. no completed script.

In a nutshell, Li makes this film in a shoot-as-you-go style. On the one hand, with such limited funding, Li chooses economical production methods to cope with the financial difficulty. On the other hand, telling a realistic story with a documentary realistic filmic narrative is also Li's aesthetic pursuit and preference. Unlike most Chinese post-fifth-generation directors, Li Yu did not graduate from a filmmaking institute such as Beijing Film Academy and The Central Academy of Drama. She began her career in the entertainment industry at a young age, serving as a host at a local TV station (Shandong TV station, 山东电视台) while studying in high school. After university she eventually joined CCTV (China Central Television, 中国中央电视台), where she directed television documentaries, before moving into feature films. With several years experience in making documentaries, she tries to reserve and present the reality in her first feature-length film.

³⁷ Cui Zi'en, "Li Yu and *Fish and Elephant* (李玉和《今年夏天》)", accessed Nov. 22, 2009, <http://www.menggang.com/movie/china/liyu/fishelephnt/fishelephnt-c.html>. 影片剧作线索看似复杂, 导演工作运行起来却全不见渲染, 不见猎奇、夸大与强调。简省的画面构成和干脆的场面衔接, 使这部影片显现出一种凝重单纯的品质。

³⁸ According to the end subtitle of the film.

One of the most impressive ingredients in the film is the instinctive performance of the two leading actors Pan Yi and Shitou, who are lesbian lovers in real life discovered by the director in a Beijing club frequented by lesbians. Though neither of them had acting experience, they were both completely engaging and frankly courageous. Dramatically, soon after Li completed the film, they separated from each other. In the director's words, "thus, their love will live forever in my movie"³⁹. There are two different versions to explain why Li uses non-professional instinctive actors in *Fish and Elephant*. In Shelly Kraicer's review of *Fish and Elephant*, Li Yu says that she found it difficult to find professional female actors for the two leading roles, given the lingering sense of taboo that still extends to portrayals of lesbians in mainland Chinese cinema.⁴⁰ In fact, some popular mainland Chinese actors have acted in homosexuality-themed films, such as Liu Ye, Hu Jun and Li Xiaoran (in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*). However, the Chinese film bureau has not inflicted any punishment on them. The above explanation looks unreliable, and is more likely to be a deliberate distortion or a kind of film promotion in the Western context. The other explanation quoted from the director's words in an interview is much more convincing:

Though they [the professional actors] are good at acting, I found that [their performance] is out of place because the excessive dramatisation destroys the sense of real. On the contrary, the non-professional actors [Pan Yi and Shiyong] play naturally and cooperate excellently in spite of having no performance

³⁹ Web data, "*Fish and Elephant*", accessed Nov. 22, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2001-09-08/56582.html>. 因此, 我的电影使她们逝去的情感成为永恒。

⁴⁰ Shelly Kraicer, "Review: *Fish and Elephant*", *The Inside Out Toronto Lesbian & Gay Film & Video Festival*, May 23, 2002, accessed Nov. 30, 2009, <http://www.chinesecinemmas.org/fishandelephant.html>.

experience.⁴¹

After auditioning some professional actors, she converted to unprofessional actors because trained performance of professional actors would probably distort the filmic reality in her mind. In order to give the actors a free hand to perform according to their intuition, Li did not even show them the script on some occasions. As she said in the same interview, “Sometimes I did not give them the script but asked them to act with their nature and intuition. In that case, their lines and performance is much better than what I can write down.”⁴² Moreover, some of the male actors who play the men having blind dates with Xiaoqun for marriage were actually recruited by fake personal ads⁴³ placed by the director. Their partially improvised conversations with Xiaoqun take unexpected turns when she chooses to reveal to them that she does not like men. Their reactions, which seem completely unrehearsed, are both comical and telling: they apparently do not comprehend the situation, and seem consistently to struggle against accepting the meaning that Xiaoqun’s words clearly contain. As Li says, “their natural response exactly reflects most Chinese men’s opinions of lesbian women”⁴⁴. Then, that is what Li expects through shooting without a completed script, namely, a real reflection of real life. Since famous Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai has a reputation of shooting without completed scripts, Li Yu was asked whether she imitates him. Li denied it and further explained:

⁴¹ Zhou Yuhong, “An Introduction and Critique of the First Lesbian-themed Film in Mainland China”. 不过就发现很可笑，她们的演技虽然很好，但是我觉得太戏剧了，没有那个感觉。虽然这些非专业演员，她们没有经验，但她们一旦达到我给她们的要求，就非常的真和默契。

⁴² Ibid. 有时候我也不给她们剧本，就任她们在现场随意地发挥，那时她们的台词和她们的表演完全是我写不出来的。

⁴³ Li Yu recruited the male actors to have a blind date with Xiaoqun by fake marriage advertisements, and then shot the procedure and conversation of their date secretly. After shooting, she would tell the men the truth. Li Nan, “The Director of Fish and Elephant Pours out the difficulty in Telling Homosexual Story”.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 结果他真实的反应就正好说明了中国男性对于她们这样的女孩的看法。

In my opinion, what motivates a director to demonstrate a theme is to explore in her unknown field. ... (Via communicating with Pan Yi and Shitou), I found that there are many things I did not realise or understand in their story: their emotions, pains and betrayal. Thus, I made this film.⁴⁵

Admittedly, the shoot-as-you-go filmic style and the instinctive performance of the real lesbian lovers successfully create a real sense of documentary realism, of straightforward, unmanipulated honesty that serves the subject particularly well. As Helen Hok-Sze claims that “The film capitalises on the actresses’ real-life connection to create an understated, documentary-like style, marked by long takes and straightforward editing.”⁴⁶ Then, does it mean that all she expects from this film is only to **record** and **probe** the real life of lesbians and nothing more? The answer is no. In fact, the film contains more than a seed of documentary. As a novice director, Li really wants to cram all of her ideas and ambitions into her maiden work, much more than merely record images.

The most obvious manifestation is the encoding of symbolism which is subjective manipulation in contrast with objective record. When asked why she called the film *Fish and Elephant*, Li responds that **fish** and **elephant** are two symbols of the women in the film:

Fish represents women like Ling, who is wandering in the society without exact aims. She is eager to find out what she wants but cannot. And the elephant – the

⁴⁵ Shitou, “Every Summer is This Summer: the Story of Film *Fish and Elephant* (每一个夏天都是今年夏天——电影《今年夏天》的故事)”, accessed Nov, 22, 2009, <http://www.menggang.com/movie/china/liyu/fishelephnt/fishelephnt-d.html>. 我认为一个导演拍电影是因为她不知道才要拍……我觉得这里边有许多我不知道的故事、不知道的情绪和她们的痛苦、她们的背叛。所以我就拍了这么一部电影。

⁴⁶ Helen Hok-Sze, “New Queer Cinema and Third Cinema”, in Michel Aaron ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, 166.

imprisoned raging beast – figures women like Junjun, who is crazy to break out of the cage and who eventually kills her father.⁴⁷

I will not argue whether the symbolism is proper or not. The fact is that Li actually inserts many inessential shots in her narrative. She takes pains to depict fish repeatedly (Figure 3-4-1): fish in aquariums, poisoned dead fish and fish on a chopping board. The pictures of the fish serve as signs of women's predicament: they are anxious and helpless, deprived of control of their own bodies. As Li illustrates, they are viewed as well as invaded, exploited and hurt.⁴⁸ Since Qun is an elephant keeper, the appearance of elephant Sakuan (name of the elephant) on the screen looks much more natural and logical. However, the director endows it with expressionist function whilst using cross montage to join the pictures of blustering elephant with those of the confrontation with guns between Junjun and the police together at the end of the film. Besides two animal signs in the title, Li intercalates another important



Figure 3-4-1

symbol – the gun – a conventional sign of the phallus and masculine power. Though the emergence of gun seems to be logical in the plots about killing the father, it is still the director's deliberate design in a sense (I will further discuss this issue in 3.5). In

⁴⁷ Shitou, "Every Summer is This Summer". 鱼的意思就是象小玲这样的，她就象社会当中一条游来游去的鱼，没有什么目的很茫然，想要找自己想要的东西，但是又找不到，很痛苦。大象，就像君君这样的女人，很愤怒，被困在一个笼子里，想冲出来，可能最后的结果就是以杀死自己的父亲而解脱。

⁴⁸ Ibid. 它可以被观赏也可以被宰割。

addition to the symbols, she also encodes some symbolic plots alluding to female consciousness and resistance in the film, which are more artistic moves than honest documentary recording. The most noticeable one is about a girl shopping in Ling's clothing store. While the girl picks up a tank top, her boyfriend berates her, "Is it too exposed? Only prostitutes on the street dress like this!" But the girl visits Ling's store again alone to try it on (Figure 3-4-2). Woman's choice of her clothes – an extension of her body – constructs a parable of the arousal or endurance of her self-awareness. In addition, Li respectively portrays each of three leading female roles "looking into mirror", which is another emblematic code associated with the ideas of self-identification, self-consciousness and self-awareness, at a time when they are standing at the twist of their lives (Figure 3-4-3).



Figure 3-4-2



Figure 3-4-3

Thus, the film educes a contradiction between the visual style and the content.

First, the symbolistic filmic methods – symbols or symbolic plots – which belong to subjective and expressionist creation are most likely to destroy the objective reality recorded by the camera. Explicitly, the director's ambition is more than replicating real life. Furthermore, what is highly questionable is that Li paid much less attention to describing the details of emotional relations among three lesbians compared with her devotion to symbol design in the narrative of a lesbian romance. Ken Plummer summarises a mere five basic plots of a sexual/love story, that is,

1. The Journey;
2. Enduring suffering;
3. Engaging in a contest;
4. Pursuing consummation;
5. Establishing a home.⁴⁹

However, the love between Qun and Ling happens suddenly and develops easily, without any hints of what their passion is based on. They first meet in Ling's clothing store casually, then mutual fondness grows. Just after a little kiss, Ling who was a heterosexual decides to move out of the home of her and her boyfriend to live with Qun. It seems that the director only tells the audience a skeleton but omits most details in process of the same-sex romance. Instead, she concentrates more on depicting some accessorial story lines. One of them is that Qun, driven by her mother, constantly has blind dates with a string of more or less eligible men. The resulting parade of desultory "dates" described in a tone of black humour mark some of the funniest moments in the film. Nonetheless, what Li anticipates mostly in these scenes is far from creating jokes only, but the conversations around sex, marriage and family

⁴⁹ Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 54-55.

between men and women (or, lesbian women). The men in the film frequently state their opinions and demands of women and women's lives, for example:

One of the matched men: [What I demand for my wife is] three words: virtuous [while doing household chores], noble [while meeting guests] and lascivious [in bedroom];

The cousin of Qun: Women should get married and have babies at your age. It is a proper thing to do.⁵⁰

What is more, Li borrows the lines of these roles to reflect the masses' reaction to homosexuality, such as "It's proper for men and women to love each other, but not the people of same sex." or "No interest in men, then what are you interested in? I think something is wrong with you. Want me to find you a therapist?"⁵¹ She also speaks through Qun (when Qun tells her mother):

I hope you understand me, mom. This is my feeling like you need a man to get married. What I need is a lover, only that my lover is a girl. ... Mom, don't you think we [Ling and I] are happy together? When two stay together, they need a feeling of happiness. I have such a feeling when I am with her.⁵²

Although these lines flow logically and naturally according to the plots, the director's repetitive arrangement of such conversations is seemingly deliberate and homiletic. Another subplot highlighted by Li is that Junjun kills her father who raped her frequently when she was a little girl. I will discuss this story of patricide associating with the symbol of the gun in the next section. As a result, Li devotes herself to create

⁵⁰ Lines in the film.

⁵¹ Lines in the film.

⁵² Lines in the film.

an expressive and metaphoric filmic narrative which is very contradictory to the documentary realism which is supposed to emphasise honest and undisrupted recording. Then what has been hiding under the coat of documentary of this film almost comes to light. Rather than recording reality, Li aims to express, even explain, her implied ideological opinions. Rather than displaying individual life experience, Li endeavours to write a collective allegory of contemporary Chinese women's predicament. Furthermore, through telling the stories of lesbian/women/subalterns in contemporary Chinese cultural context, the director successfully endows herself with the privilege of speaking. Rey Chow's discussion about the depiction of "natives" is also plausible in this issue:

Once we do that, we see that in our fascination with the "authentic native", we are actually engaged in a search for the equivalent of the aura even while our search processes themselves take us farther and farther away from that "original" point of identification.⁵³

Whilst Li tries to display an "authentic life" of homosexuals and to justify their normality, she simultaneously rapes them to some extent. Under the banner of consideration for the lesbians – an oppressed and marginalised group, she actually endangers them in a political context. As J. Hillis Miller argues:

[T]he more cultural studies work for the celebration, preservation, and empowerment of subordinated cultures the more it may aid in the replication of just those political orders it would contest.⁵⁴

Then Li's ambition under the coat of documentary is unveiled: she uses the

⁵³ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 46.

⁵⁴ J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 19-20.

theme of the lesbian, and the so-called authenticity in her filmic narrative, aided by the two leading actors' real identities as lesbians, to obtain the power of discourse. It is as if Li herself has noticed her exploitation of the lesbian theme and women. In interviews more than once, she had tried to attribute her thematic choice to a kind of coincidence. For example, "My original idea is only to probe the relations among women, and the story treated lesbians only by chance"⁵⁵. Nevertheless, she indicated that she mentioned the film as "the first lesbian mainland Chinese film" only to conform to producer's marketing strategy.⁵⁶ However, all these excuses sound farfetched whilst the whole film plus all the critiques and discussions around it are focusing on the lesbian issue. Compared with Dai Sijie, Li's exploitation of lesbianism is more latent. Unlike Dai who erotises and objectivises the lesbian images into male sexual imaginary objects by dramatic and artificial filmic methods, Li adopts the documentary visual language to show her realistic humanitarian consideration for the marginal group. As I will show in Chapter 5, despite the fact that she refuses to put women in the male voyeuristic gaze, she sets up another gaze relationship in her filmic narrative.⁵⁷ In this case, it is her gaze as a director that scrutinises not only the tragic female roles, but also all the male roles who harbour "unenlightened" prejudice toward or even are ignorant of lesbian/homosexuality. Furthermore, to some extent, she is also gazing at the Chinese mass. Via the homiletic lines delivered in the film to underscore the normality of homosexuality, she acts as a primary sexuality teacher who is so confident of her cultural progressiveness, strutting past, or even squinting now and again at the mass audience. Instead of setting up a

⁵⁵ Li Nan, "The Director of *Fish and Elephant* Pours out the difficulty in Telling Homosexual Story". 李玉说, 她拍《今年夏天》的本意是探索女人之间的关系, 只不过故事恰巧发生在同性恋者身上而已。

⁵⁶ Ibid. 李玉说, 之所以打出“中国第一部女同性恋电影”的旗号, 也许是发行者基于市场的考虑。

⁵⁷ See the details in 5.2.

spectatorship between the audience and the queer, she objectivises the heterosexual roles in the film and shows even most Chinese audiences, who are supposed to be ignorant of homosexuality, to be spectacles in a western cultural context. Her realistic consideration of a marginal theme and group, as well as her supporting statement for them, both distinctively contrast with most Chinese and manifest her humanitarian spirit. Moreover, these so-called humanitarian considerations and spirit are defined by, and regarded as superior and advanced in western ideology. Thus she is able to identify herself as an intellectual, more specifically, the intellectual by the western definition, from the moment she states her complete recognition of homosexuality. Yes, the film is real, and also more than real.

3.5 “Ethical” or “Revolutionary” Narrative?

Through analysing *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* and *Fish and Elephant*, I find that the representations of lesbian romance by male and female directors are different in spite of the fact that they both exploit the queer theme to their own ends. Dai Sijie, a male director, erotises the images of lesbian women for men as well as the privileged western desire visually, while Li Yu, a female director, illustrates and uses the lesbian issue in an ideological sphere.

However, a common characteristic between these two homosexual-themed films is that they both undertake grandly historical and political propositions as queer cinema in underdeveloping countries (Though Dai makes film with French funding, the background of the story and his Chinese identity still designates the films to belong to Third World cinema). When analysing Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West*

Palace, which is acclaimed as the first mainland queer cinema, Helen Hok-Sze indicates that:

[Q]ueer spaces – as yet unassimilated by mainstream cinema – are affiliated with other outlawed and marginalised pockets of a society that has left its revolutionary history behind. As China veers away from the political path of Third Worldist radicalism, thus eclipsing the climate once favourable to Third Cinema practices, queer cinema arrives on the scene to become **the new icon of rebellion**.⁵⁸

Carrying out the rebellious mission, Chinese queer cinema, including the films discussed in this chapter, cannot help injecting a collective allegory around belief, politics, ideology and discourse into a personal love/sexual story. I categorise such filmic narrative mode as “revolutionary narrative” which is opposite to ethnical narrative based on Liu Xiaofeng’s argument. In his book *Unbearable Body*, Liu Xiaofeng illustrates the narrative difference between revolutionary and ethical stories: “a revolutionary story narrates from only one subjective viewpoint while an ethical story tells individual stories by diverse subjects.”⁵⁹ In his dictionary, an individual story means one’s individual experience and feeling of life and being.⁶⁰ The “revolutionary story” in his words does not mean the stories of revolutionary history but those narrated from a confrontational standpoint with an aggressively rebellious attitude. According to him, both Dai Sijie and Li Yu adopt a revolutionary narrative format rather than an ethical one in their films of lesbian romance when they impose,

⁵⁸ Helen Hok-Sze, “New Queer Cinema and Third Cinema”, 165. My emphasis.

⁵⁹ Liu Xiaofeng, *Unbearable Body: Narratives of Modernist Ethic* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2000), 44. 革命故事的讲法只有唯一的叙事主体，伦理故事的讲法是让每个人讲自己的故事，所谓的多元的主体叙事。

⁶⁰ Liu Xiaofeng demonstrates the contradiction between public will (人民公意) and individual feeling of life (个体生存感受) in “Danton and Prostitute”, *ibid.*, 1-33.

or even produce, the symbolic representation on the female roles' individual feeling of their lives. Striving to establish a rebellious signature, they end up trapping the love/sexual stories in a discursive cage of politics and ideology.

Then who is the antagonist of this revolution? Men, firstly and certainly. The first stratum of those contained in these queer cinemas is actually a feminist discourse, just as Li Lin indicates, "there is explicit statement of feminist standpoint within Chinese lesbian cinema."⁶¹ Since the late 1960s, lesbians have been visible as activists and contributors to the second-wave feminist movement.⁶² Moreover, lesbianism tends to be associated with radical feminism, consistent with American feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson's sensational statement that "feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice".⁶³ In this manner, both Li and Dai's films express the concentrated pursuit of a feminist statement of rebellion.

The most representative manifestation of the feminist tendency in these films is the subversion and demonisation of images of male roles, especially the father. In both *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* and *Fish and Elephant*, "father" is a disgraceful name connoting selfishness, bigotry, obstinacy, impudicity and even contemptibility. In Dai's description, the "father" is an autocrat to his daughter. Professor Chen treats Ann as a servant, always condemning her severely and callously for some trivial mistake, such as serving breakfast late or forgetting to cover the roses from the rain. In his rigid dominion, Ann's youthful vivacity has gradually faded, and then Li Ming finds a way to enlighten her to walk out of her lonely and hopeless life.

⁶¹ Li Lin, "An Analysis of the Paradox in Chinese Lesbian Films". 华语女同性恋电影分明是站在女权主义立场进行的书写。

⁶² Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 19.

⁶³ Attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson. Quoted from Anne Koedt, "Lesbianism and Feminism", in ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine & Anita Rapone, *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 246.

Meanwhile, Li Yu depicts the “father” as weak, shameless, and even cruel. Qun’s father leaves the family for another woman and makes a hideous scene of pleading on his knees, which his daughter witnessed when she was five years old. More radically, Junjun has been suffering from sexual abuse by her father since she was ten. Furthermore, both films represent the strong patricide complex of the daughters: Ann assaults Professor Chen with a crabstick and Junjun kills her father with a gun. Therefore, to a degree, in these filmic narratives, the existence of female homosexuality is explained as a kind of revenge against the paternal oppression, but not a natural condition.

Moreover, both Dai and Li create disappointing heterosexual plights by creating negative male images to serve as a foil for a pure and beautiful mirror-image⁶⁴ of same-sex love. This is seen in the contrastive depiction of the brother and sister, Dandan and Ann: the brother hits Li Ming like a beast while the sister softly comforts her wounded body and heart. Li Yu also portrays a depressing picture of heterosexuality, although she does not describe any heterosexual relationship in details. First, both Qun and Junjun have grown up in dysfunctional families – the former one is broken because of the man’s betrayal and the latter has an externally intact structure but actually melts under the father’s despotic power. Not only delivered through the roles’ narration, the lamentable state of heterosexual marriage is also illustrated visually. When Qun talks with the policeman who has had a blind date with her beside the footpath, a middle-aged couple is presenting a furious drama in the background, cursing each other with dirty words and eventually bursting into violent fight with the husband chasing to hit the wife. Thus, the narratives of both films fall into a paradigm that Li Lin criticises: “all the male roles in Chinese lesbian

⁶⁴ “Mirror image” here refers to the idealist imagination of reality, according to Lacan’s theories of mirror.

cinema are given debased or condemned status arbitrarily, losing the multiple dimensions of personality, and they become the virtual signs of patriarchal oppression and hegemony.”⁶⁵ That is to say, the filmic narrative drastically eliminates power of speaking from men. Thus, to some extent, the narrative itself embodies another kind of gender discourse hegemony: female discourse hegemony. Instead of adopting a more tolerant and equal consideration of genders, the directors conversely construct an oppositional confrontation between discourses of women and men.

Besides the design of roles and plots, the directors even deliver the feminist discourse resisting the male culture and desire in their presentation of sexual scenes. I have discussed in 3.3 how Dai Sijie eroticises the lesbian images and the scenes of them having sex for male voyeuristic gaze. However, when he depicts the girls taking each other's virginity before Li Ming's wedding night, the formalistic and aggressive (to patriarchal tradition) sexual behaviour between same-sex lovers itself becomes a transcendental signifier that signifies a rebellious discourse. In comparison, the depiction of sexual scenes in *Fish and Elephant* embodies a more radical feminist viewpoint through the revealingly but rough exhibition of the homosexual encounters. Without any beautification with artificial techniques, the bodies of homosexual women and their sexual behaviour are exposed on the screen by straightforward cinematography and editing (Figure 3-5-1). Whether the male audience will eroticise these pictures eventually, the frank portrayal of female homosexuality – the sex without men/phallus – challenges the phallo-centric discourse either physically or mentally.

⁶⁵ Li Lin, “An Analysis of the Paradox in Chinese Lesbian Films”. 华语女同性恋电影几乎将所有的男性人物都置于被贬的地位,男性形象失却了丰富的人性维度,成为霸道、冷漠、懦弱等符号性的虚化存在,和男权压迫的概念式刻板代言。



Figure 3-5-1

In conclusion, both of these two films construct strong feminist discourses against male hegemony, like many other examples of Queer Cinema in Anat Pick's analysis:

While "queer" ideally signals an emancipated (and potentially limitless) range of sexual and social relations, most of the products identified as "new" and 'queer' were in contrast overwhelmingly male.⁶⁶

More specifically, in my opinion, what is represented in the films is a discourse resistant to the power of masculinity. A significant common feature is that no cross-dressing female roles, which usually (though not necessarily) act as essential roles in lesbian narratives, appear in either of them. The directors reject women's transgender role-playing so as to eradicate any masculine images involved in the "speaking" subjects. The crux is not the absence of cross-dressing women itself, but an arbitrary division between the representation of femininity and masculinity. In these filmic narratives, any images of masculinity are subverted with a gender political discourse. As a result, the equal consideration of two genders as well as that of two sexes is eliminated. Not only images of men, but those of women also are trapped into virtual existence simultaneously. As Li Lin argues:

⁶⁶ Pick, "New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films", 105.

When Chinese lesbian cinema is breaking the distorted mirror made by male hegemony, it manipulates another distorted mirror at the same time. ...What is paralleled with the stereotypical images of the male as oppressor is the stereotypical images of the female as resister. Whilst the oppressor is pre-digested into an ideological illustration, the resister has become a symbolic spelling.⁶⁷

What is more, the revolution rises up in the sphere far more than that of sex/gender confrontation. Besides the subversion of male images, the arrangement of social identities of these male roles is also highly codified; signifiers like Scientist (Professor Chen), soldier (Dandan) and policeman all represent the power mechanism. In addition, instead of portraying the daily life of the lesbians, the films focus more on the signifier scenes such as smoking, masturbation, sexual abuse, gunfight, sentence, patricide, and so forth. Therefore, what the directors try to deliver through the resistant posture within the coat of feminist representation is a “minority discourse”. Rey Chow criticises in *Writing Diaspora* the choice of some overseas Chinese intellectuals to speak and write from a “minor” position because “minority discourse” has become a hot topic in cultural studies in the West since 1990s. “While enjoying the privilege of living in the West, they cling, in their discourse, to the status of the neglected ‘other’.”⁶⁸ Today, it is nonetheless related to overseas Chinese intellectuals, like Dai Sijie, having further identification of western culture and knowledge of Third World intellectuals at a time of globalisation. Actually, many Chinese intellectuals and artists, like Li Yu, prefer to play the role of western gazer. They show a penchant for

⁶⁷ Li Lin, “An Analysis of the Paradox in Chinese Lesbian Films”. 华语女同性恋电影在打碎了男性霸权制造的失真镜子的同时,却又激进地再造了另一面同样失真的镜子。……与深重压迫者的男性形象相伴相生的是决绝反抗者的女性形象,压迫者被简化为理念的图解,反抗者只是僵硬姿势的拼贴。

⁶⁸ Chow, *Writing diaspora*, 109.

minority themes such as lesbianism because “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, all minority stories need to be demonstrated as revolutionary allegory. Consequently, the lesbian who has to stand for the minority is no longer a natural being but a kind of formalistic existence abducted to be exploited in these revolutionary narratives. The filmic narrative hence embodies another discursive hegemonism, that is, the revolutionary discourse in Liu Xiaofeng’s approach. Meanwhile, the individual feelings for life including that of love, desire, libido and sexual orgasm are ignored, covered, and exploited. The pose of feminism itself has become a performance of identification in the discursive game.

Besides the content of *The Chinese Botanist’s Daughters*, even its production process is promoted as one of the poses in this game. The background of the story in the film is China, yet the film is in fact shot in Vietnam. In both Chinese and English websites, the reason is given that the film was not allowed to be shot in China due to the sensibility of the homosexuality subject, so that the director chose Vietnam instead to create a similar environment. Though I cannot get the documentation about the negotiation between this film production and Chinese government in detail, I remain suspicious of this issue. As mentioned in 3.4, none of the Chinese actors, including Li Xiaoran and Lin Dongfu starred in *The Chinese Botanist’s Daughters*, have been punished by the Chinese government for acting in a homosexuality-themed film. Nevertheless, the film was financed by French funding and released by a French production company so that it belongs to French cinema from the legal point of view. Thus, was it necessary for the Chinese government to refuse to “lend” the location for the sake of film subject? It is probably that the French production and the Chinese government failed to agree to cooperation for other reasons, or Dai proposed to shoot

⁶⁹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

in Vietnam from the very beginning. Whatever the reason is, the choice of shooting location, which implies the conflict between the western and eastern ideology, has already been a kind of advertisement for film promotion. Therefore, it is unimportant whether the film represents a feminist discourse or not at all. What crucial is that “all about lesbianism” is proper and useful in the game of power and discourse. Eventually, a sexual/love story turns into an altogether revolutionary one.

Due to total ignorance of the existence of the homosexuality in mainland China during the Maoist era, representation of homosexuality was absent in either the sphere of art works or sociological academia for several decades from 1949 to the early 1990s. As a result, any portrayal of, or connection to, homosexuality in any artistic forms is still controversial today. To most Chinese audiences, not only the love and lives of homosexuals, but also queer culture is something secret, mysterious and spectacular. In this respect, queer films show some advance in the context of culture and sociology in contemporary China. However, through analysing the lesbian-themed films directed by Dai Sijie and Li Yu, I find that the post-fifth-generation directors embed a discourse that is more than that of homosexuality per se. In other words, beneath the “illustration” and “record” of lesbian and their love/sexuality, they actually exploit them in a sense.

Dai’s exploitation of lesbian romance contains three strata. First, he positions the body of female homosexual for the male voyeuristic and fetish gaze. Since the film mainly aims at western market, he eroticises the Chinese belle and the Chinese lesbian

by carefully rendering the exoticism of them and exotic scenery for western audience. Secondly, he exhibits an imaginary China in the sphere of politics, apart from the exotic belle and scenery, as a spectacle by exaggerating and fabricating Chinese “fatuous culture and dark despotism” with implausible plots for the western orientalist gaze. Thirdly, through placing one of the lesbian protagonists as an agent of western gaze, Dai completes his self-identification with the western cultural standpoint. In consequence, the story is illustrated in an artificial and fictitious visual representation, because the director plays two opposite roles at the same time: a Chinese narrator and a western gazer.

Compared with Dai Sijie, Li exploits the lesbian theme latently while adopting a documentary-like visual style to show her realistic and humanitarian consideration for a marginal group. Instead of setting up an erotic spectatorship between the audience and the queer, she objectivises the male and heterosexual roles in the film as well as the majority of the Chinese audience, who are or are supposed to be ignorant and prejudiced against homosexuality, making them spectacles for the West. Her realistic consideration of and support for a marginal group, both of which are distinctive in contrast with the Chinese mass, are an exact representation of her humanitarian spirit. Moreover, here so-called humanitarian consideration and spirit are without doubt defined by, and regarded as superior and advanced in western ideology. Through designating the male and heterosexual roles in the film and the majority of Chinese audience as the Other, Li manages to identify herself with an intellectual in the spheres of western culture, politics and ideology.

In addition, representations of the “queer”, such as queer gaze, queer discourse, and so forth, are always attributed to the identity of a minority, which is in contrast

with the male hegemony. At the same time the word “lesbianism” is recognised in paralleled with radical feminism, just as Anne Koedt writes in “Lesbianism and Feminism”:

Feminists have been called “lesbian” long before they may have, in fact, considered its application in their personal lives; it as been an insult directed at them with escalated regularity ever since they began working politically for women's liberation.⁷⁰

Though it is attributed to a sort of distorted designation alleged by the patriarchal prejudice in a sense, lesbian feminism is actually one of the important branches in “second wave”⁷¹ feminist movement. As a result, lesbian-themed films focusing on female same-sex romance and excluding male perspective and presence from the narrative subject are supposed to deliver a female or feminist discourse.

Admittedly, the filmic representations of these two lesbian romances, including their narrative structure, cinematography and mise-en-scene, embody a strong pursuit of a feminist discourse of resistance. First, through subverting and transmogrifying the male images, especially those of the “father” whose name works as sign of male hegemony and patriarchal power, the directors set up a negative male group opposite to the narrative subject – women. Secondly, both directors create an innocent and admirable representation of female same-sex love in contrast with the disappointing and depressing situation of heterosexual love relationship. As a result, a discursive

⁷⁰ Koedt, “Lesbianism and Feminism”, 246-247.

⁷¹ “The so-called ‘second wave’ in feminism is, as the term suggest, a continuation of a movement, that earlier phase of feminism which clamoured for civic equality for women via the vote, achieved in the United States and United Kingdom during the first two decades of this [20th] century. Second wave feminism, then, is ‘the second peak of a feminist movement that has existed for more than 100 years’.” See Drude Dahlerup, ed., *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA* (London: Sage, 1986), 2.

confrontation between the two genders is created in the filmic narrative of lesbian romance. The films thus embrace an intensive resistant discourse of women which is a typical representation in the second-wave feminist movement.

However, a feminist discourse, which is launched as production of power competition, is not equal to a female discourse. Jana Sawicki criticises the way Marxism and radical feminism take the women's movement as the key to human liberation. In her words:

Both Marxism and radical feminism conceive of historical process as a dialectical struggle for human liberation. Both have turned to history to locate the origins of oppression, and to identify a revolutionary subject. They view the struggles of women as a sex/class as the key to human liberation.⁷²

In these approaches, sex/gender is a discursive symbol that can be used, politicised and exploited for power revolution. Similarly, the sex/love stories of lesbians in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* and *Fish and Elephant* – not only the sex/gender but also these homosexual women's identities of deviancy and minority– are encoded as signifiers in a revolutionary discourse. According to Foucault, “[t]he real strength of the women's movement is ... that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality”.⁷³ As soon as the identities of lesbians are signified in narratives for revolutionary purposes, the whole representation of lesbians is trapped within the cage of discourse. And the identity of homosexual is still deviant when it is used in a revolutionary discourse. By the same token, the feminist discourse presented in the films is a “chip” in the power game and part of the

⁷² Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), 19.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980) 219-220.

directors' identification performance.

Chapter 4

Where Have All the Men Gone?¹

The Women's Stories with the Men's Absence

In this chapter, I will analyse two films directed by a female director Ma Liwen, namely, *Gone Is the One Who Holds Me Dearest in the World* and *You and Me*. Ma Liwen is a newly emerged female director who graduated from the directing department of the CAD in 1998. At the end of 2001, Ma debuted in the Chinese film arena with her maiden work *Gone Is the One*. This film was screened in the unit of “Winds of Asia-Middle East” of the 16th Tokyo International Film Festival (2003), and brought her the best director award in the 6th Changchun Film Festival (长春电影节, Changchun dianyingjie, 2002). In 2005, she was crowned the Best Director in the 14th China Golden Rooster and Full Blossom Film Festival (金鸡百花电影节, Jinji baihua dianyingjie) for her second film *You and Me*. The actress Jin Yaqin (金雅琴) was awarded the Best Actress at the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival (2005) for her extraordinary acting in this film at the age of eighty-four.

Ma's first two works earned high appraisal for their consideration for humanity, and their realistic filming methods illustrating true interpersonal emotions.² Due to her focus on women's unique emotion, mentality and self-awareness, her films are claimed as “Chinese feminist films”, which refers to films reflecting the emotion,

¹ I borrow the title from the title of Rey Chow's essay “Where Have All the Natives Gone?”, in Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 27-54.

² Zheng, Dongtian, “Look Forward to Original Achievement (期待原创性)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5 (1992): 13.

mentality and self-awareness of Chinese women, and they represent a female discourse from female subjective perspectives.³ Some critics, such as Vanderstaay and Wu Xiaoli, consider her films showing much more female consciousness than the works of male directors and earlier female directors.⁴ However, I retain my hypothesis about the word “feminist” in this chapter. There are several common characteristics between these two films. First, both tell a story that happened between two women. Second, each story is full of tears. Third, both stories are based on quasi-autobiographical texts. Fourth, both are composed in a cyclic structure. What is more, both films tell the women’s stories in the absence of men: in terms of stories, no male character plays an important role within the narrative; in terms of character creation, no male role has a complicated personality; in terms of the camera shots, no frame is shot from a male character’s point of view.

In this chapter, I will first discuss how Ma constructs a female-centred narrative and filmic look. Through analysing the narrative mode in 4.2, I will verify how she excludes male characters from the filmic narrative, and then demonstrate how she avoids the male gaze towards the female characters, through analysing the film language in 4.3. After that, I will discuss in 4.4 whether Ma has created a female spectatorship when she ultimately declines a male one. In 4.5, I will put aside the problem of male’s absence temporarily in order to examine the gender discourse which potentially builds these women’s films without interruption from male mottos. Through analysing these two films focusing on the phenomenon of the male’s absence,

³ Web article. “The Fourth Report: Ma Liwen and *You and Me* (第四组报告：马俪文导演的电影《我们俩》)”, accessed May. 28, 2009, <http://mypaper.pchome.com.tw/kkkk6912/post/1311468213>. 马俪文的电影，主要是反映中国女性独特的心理、情感与自我意识的“中国女性电影”。这类电影是以女性的主观视点与女性的叙述声音为主流话语……

⁴ Lara Vanderstaay, “Female consciousness in contemporary Chinese women directors' films: A case study of Ma Xiaoying's *Gone is the One Who Held Me Dearest in the World*”, *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in Asia and the Pacific* 16 (February 2008): 1-14; Wu Xiaoli, “A Study of Some Chinese Films Directed by Female Directors in New Century”, *Dianying yishu* 6 (2004): 40-45.

I want to answer the following questions: Where are the men? Why are they excluded from these filmic narratives? Is it possible for a woman to represent female consciousness with men's presence? If the female audience is the spectator of a feminist narrative film, and if these two films can be regarded as feminist films, then who is the spectacle in the films?

4.1 Synopsis of the Selected Films

Gone Is the One was released in China in December 2001. It was adapted from a novel of the same title written by Zhang Jie (张洁), a Chinese female writer, telling a story about complex emotions between a mother and a daughter. The film begins with the ending: an elderly mother passes away and her daughter is frantic and tearful. The rest is a tender flashback about how this woman comforts her dying mother who has only a few months to live. Madame-He⁵ (played by Siqin Gaowa 斯琴高娃), as a middle-aged woman with a successful career from writing, a family, and a life of her own, is too busy to notice that her mother's health is deteriorating. When she comes back to Beijing to see her mother after a celebration of her newly-published book, she is shocked by the many signs of senile dementia shown by her mother (Huang Suying, 黄素影). Her old mother talks to cats, has trouble walking and has almost lost her sight. With a deep sense of guilt for leaving her mother alone in recent years, the daughter takes her mother to the hospital and swears to take good care of her. In spite

⁵ "He" is the surname of the female protagonist in this film. In order to avoid the confusion between "He" and the English pronoun "he", I call her Madame-He in this thesis.

of the fact that their life together is full of conflicts, they always think of each other more than of themselves (and maybe this is the exact reason for their conflicts). After tumour-removal surgery on her brain, the old woman appears much healthier than before. However, the surgery does not slow down the inevitability of old age, or stop the steps of death. The mother passes away soon, and Madame-He's own daughter, Shubao, comes back from overseas, and will probably start another story between mother and daughter.

You and Me was co-produced by China Film Group Corporation (中国电影集团公司, Zhongguo dianying jituangongsi), Beijing Film Studio and CCTV Movie Channel. The story starts with a girl (played by Gong Zhe, 宫哲) looking for a place to stay in Beijing. The girl Xiao Ma is a college student in her twenties majoring in arts, who studies in Beijing but is not a local resident there. She goes in search of a flat to live in, on a snowy day, and finally moves in an old courtyard (四合院 Siheyuan) that belongs to an old lonely spinster (Jin Yaqin). At first, the relationship between these two women is just like a Chinese idiom: the point of the needle vs. the awn of the wheat (针尖对麦芒, Zhenjian dui maimang)⁶. To the old woman, the girl always breaks the rules and disturbs her peaceful life; to the young girl, the old woman is a niggardly, critical and inflexible landlord. Several times they almost break up over some trifle matters, such as telephone fee, or the use of refrigerator or heater. But as they spend time together their friendship grows. The energetic young girl brings into the fusty courtyard change, colour and hope; the old woman also witnesses the girl experiencing the sweetness and bitterness of love. As time passes by, they forge a spiritual bond between each other. The old woman even considers making a

⁶ This idiom means that two sides of argument match point by point, which also describes two persons always being opposite to each other.

match of the girl with her grandson. However, the girl is destined to leave the courtyard to continue her own life. In order to occupy the old courtyard, the old woman's adopted daughter moves her to the countryside after Xiao Ma has left. The old woman passes away soon afterwards.

4.2 Stories Uniquely for Women

Ma's first two works both narrate stories between two women: mother and daughter, or an old woman landlord and a young girlish tenant. Women are the absolute protagonists, not only leading the narrative, but also constructing the plots and the image that the audience tends to identify with. All the female images, even those of supporting roles, are portrayed with complicated emotions, vivid personalities and with important functions within the development of plots. Conversely, none of the male roles in these films is essential. Even if we remove all of them from the narrative, the storyline can still go forward. They are depicted simply and obscurely, nevertheless in a negative tone. In contrast with the mainstream male-centred films, in which male roles advance the story, control the events and female roles accordingly, Ma's films are overwhelmingly female-centred narratives which can be interpreted by the extremely unequal proportions of the portrayal between female and male characters.

As a young director without a reputation, Ma recognises clearly that her first film was quite limited in terms of commercial value. With the specific aim of making artistic film like other post-fifth-generation directors, and a small investment of only

1.43 million RMB pieced together from four minor investors⁷ at the same time, Ma produced *Gone Is the One* with an awareness of the importance of role creation at the very beginning. As she writes in her directing notes of *Gone Is the One*:

There is no adventurous plot, love story, action scene or exotic beauty presented in this film. So what features should be presented in this film to attract and move the audience? It should be the charisma of the characters themselves. We therefore should intensively present the multidimensional personality of the mother and daughter by using various filmic methods ...⁸

The primary narrative of *Gone Is the One* is a reproduction of Madame-He's diary about her mother's death and the last days they spent together. The director naturally depicts Madame-He, who is functioning as the narrator and leading the plot, in complex and multiple dimensions. In this film, the protagonist Madame-He is a woman living with four different roles, namely, a professional woman, wife, daughter and mother. Nonetheless, she is trapped in ambivalent feelings within each identity. As a professional woman, Madame-He is a celebrated female writer enjoying a successful career, yet is tired of being engrossed in various public and social functions. As a wife, she cannot feel love or get any support from her husband. Her marriage is uneventful, without quarrels, but cold at the same time, bonded by sheer responsibilities without emotions. Meanwhile, it seems that Madame-He does not want to terminate her second marriage (both Madame-He and her husband have

⁷ Web article, "Gone Is the One: A Memorable Film (《世界上最疼我的那个人去了》: 回味长过片名)", *Beijing Chenbao*, Oct. 12, 2002, accessed June 14, 2009, http://www.dmcc.gov.cn/index/asp/c_dms/MovieNewss.asp?NewsID=743.

⁸ Web data, "The Director's Production Notes of *Gone Is the One* (《世界上最疼我的那个人去了》导演阐述)", accessed June 6, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2006-12-08/12151361894.html>. 这部影片既没有发生惊险情节, 也没有爱情佐料; 既没有打斗场面, 也没有异国情调。那么, 它的特色是什么? 它靠什么吸引观众和打动观众? 这部影片要抓住的特色在于: 以人物取胜。因此要调动各种艺术手段, 细致刻画展示出母女二人的性格和各方面的色彩, 要有立体感。

divorced once before they married each other) despite it being a bonding without love. As a daughter, she feels guilty for ignoring her mother until she discovers how ill her mother is. She swears to take good care of her and cure her disease; however, sometimes she is impatient, even rude to her. The director does not show much about Madame-He's life as mother, but the introduction of her daughter on the screen in the final scene leads to another round of mother-daughter conflicts with Madame-He's identity transferring to the side of the mother. Moreover, Madame-He's multiple identities drag her down, with interwoven responsibilities constantly in conflict with each other. She has worn herself out in the harsh struggles for a career in the patriarchal world, so that she has little time to stay with her mother. Although she works hard as a professional writer, her husband still puts all the burdens of housework on her. He also shows much dissatisfaction with Madame-He bringing her mother home after the surgery, giving the excuse that he has a heart disease so that he needs a quiet living environment. Under the pressure of all these identities together, Madame-He is indeed a complicated woman living in a complicated situation.

Similarly, Madame-He's mother is also a multi-perspective, vivid and powerful artistic image. She frequently acts more like a child than a mother, due to her increasing senility throughout the film. She behaves naively, irritates the hospital staff, and relies excessively on her daughter. Especially after the brain surgery, she becomes extremely temperamental, which almost drives Madame-He to exhaustion. Meanwhile, she still harbours the power of motherhood in her heart. She refuses to go to hospital at first because she is afraid of wasting her daughter's money and disturbing her marriage and career life. Then she stubbornly insists on the dangerous brain surgery while Madame-He begins to hesitate, because she hopes to look after her daughter as long as possible. One of the most moving scenes is the mother's

dream in which she is standing at the bottom of a deep gorge refusing the summons from “God”. She says that she cannot die yet as she has not said goodbye to her daughter.

The director gives great depth to the female characters but not to their male counterparts, as the latter are not given the same attention within the narrative. Three supporting male roles who are given a voice in *Gone Is the One* are Madame-He’s husband, her mother’s surgeon Dr Luo, and a photographer. All those three, either their identities or the personalities, are portrayed briefly from only one aspect. Dr Luo is a typical surgeon, who is calm and rational and speaks with a range of technical terms. We cannot see him expressing any individual emotion or mood throughout this film, just giving professional explanations and suggestions from an objective stance as a medical doctor. Madame-He’s husband, too, is a flat character. Although he shows some characteristics such as selfishness and narrow-mindedness, all them belong to a traditional chauvinistic man. The significance of his existence in the narrative is only to be Madame-He’s husband; otherwise, he is vacuum. As the most important male role in this film – the husband of the female protagonist, his role in narrative is significantly smaller than that of Xiao Yue, a female supporting role who is the nursing maid of Madame-He’s mother. Though the director does not portray Xiao Yue’s personality in a complicated way, she installs Xiao as an omnipotent eye to complete the story about Madame-He’s mother: when the first-narrator Madame-He is absent, Xiao serves as a supplementary presence, to witness Madame-He’s mother’s story because of her constant close proximity to her.

In a word, all the male roles in *Gone Is the One* are limited to their flat identities as husband, surgeon or photographer, and function to complete this women’s story.

They are supporting roles installed to provide a heterosexual context for a female-centred story, but to be excluded from the narrative centre. Instead of acting as individual human beings, they are no more than dull stereotypical puppets.

The manifestation of a female-centred narrative appears in *You and Me* as well. Ma Liwen not only portrays all the male characters briefly, but also tends to obscure their images with her cinematographic tactics. When male roles are in front of the camera, the director frequently uses wide-angle shots to avoid depicting the detail of their appearance or even hides them partially behind some prop such as window and tree. It is hard for the audience to remember what Xiao Ma's boyfriend looks like, even though he is an important man in the female-protagonist's life. The only shot in which his face is clearly legible is not a specific close-up shot of him. The camera pans from bottom to top to depict these young lovers packing to leave the courtyard, and his front face appears in the frame as he looks back. This close-up shot with wide-angle lens distorts his face. Therefore, it is his face intruding into the frame rather than being portrayed deliberately. The only male role endowed with full face portrait is the old woman's grandson, who is the male role functioning most importantly in the narrative, as he is the only character who probably links the later lives of Xiao Ma and the old landlord together. However, he is present only in three scenes and appears in frames less than one minute in length. While the audience members are deeply impressed by the female characters, they can only catch a brief glimpse of their male counterparts. Their appearances are too brief to be remembered or impressive.

In addition, Ma portrays most male characters with a negative intonation in terms of personality and morality. None of them is active, positive or noble-minded in her filmic representations.

In *Gone Is the One*, Madame-He's husband is a typical Chinese man with traditional misogynous ideology, treating his wife as an appendage of himself and ascribing all the responsibilities of housework to her. He is so selfish and self-centred that he demands that his wife pick up his parents from the train station on the same day as her mother's surgery. And then he expresses his strong dissatisfaction for Madame-He arranging her mother to live under the same roof with them after the brain surgery, with the ludicrous excuse that he needs a quiet environment to rest specifically for his heart disease. (According to him, Madame-He's mother is a naughty and noisy old woman, and he is more ill than her who had just had brain surgery.) Here is the exact negative configuration of Ma's production notes for this character:

The husband is a severe and cold man who treats females as inferior to males. Though he does not love his wife deeply, he relies on her by loading all the responsibilities of housework upon her. ... He has never shown any concern about either the success or the difficulties in Madame-He's life.⁹

As discussed above, Dr. Luo acts as a rational doctor without any emotion. However, through Madame-He's voice-over, the director implies that the mother's death is partially due to his blind self-confidence and self-righteousness. Even though the male photographer is a removable character, the director still takes time to emphasise his negative personality, which is exposed in the plot by the photographer cheating Madame-He's mother when taking pictures for her. We cannot get more information about his personality, except that he is at least not a man respecting elderly people.

⁹ Web data, "The Director's Production Notes of *Gone Is the One*". 先生——严肃、冷漠、有男尊女卑的意识。对诃没有太深感情却依赖性很强，懒惰。并把全部的家庭生活重担寄托在对方身上……对诃的成功和困难一直采取不管不问、事不关己高高挂起的态度。

Insignificant as those male roles are, the director endeavours, on purpose, to expose their repellent personalities with detailed film language.

Neither can we find a positive or active man in *You and Me*. Xiao Ma's younger brother and her boyfriend are both naïve and imprudent. The old woman's grandson appears to be kind at first, when he is helping Xiao Ma to connect the dial line and trying to mediate between her and his grandmother. However, he gradually exposes his selfishness and even despicable "visage" at the end when he expresses his intention to start a love relationship with Xiao Ma while he actually has a sweetheart in Guizhou; he eventually banishes his old grandmother to the countryside to occupy her courtyard.

According to the analyses above, the male characters in these two films can be summarised in three phrases, that is, simple personality, obscure image and condemnable morality. In short, Ma portrays the male roles flatly and negatively while glorifying their female counterparts with positive sophistication.

What is more, in contrast with the substantial description of the complicated emotional confrontation occurring between two female protagonists, the description of heterosexual relations is implicit and brief. Ma acknowledges heterosexual relationships in both films, that is, the relation between Madame-He and her husband in *Gone Is the One* and that between Xiao Ma and her boyfriend in *You and Me*. However, neither of them serves as the hub of the story. Madame-He's husband is presented in three scenes with no more than ten sentences of dialogue. The only information that these filmic depictions bring forth is the coldness and apartness in their marriage, naturally leading both the audience and the female roles in the films to blame everything on the husband's selfishness. Ma also veils the love story between

Xiao Ma and her boyfriend in *You and Me*. This love relationship is disclosed symbolically with a big teddy bear and the girl's smiles and tears at first, and a glimpse at the end of the film. Although we can find some devious changes within this love story depicted dimly, these young lovers have never communicated in front of the camera.

Through the comparative portrayal of female and male characters, I find that Ma intends to compose the filmic representation uniquely for women in her early films, by preventing all the male characters from functioning in the narrative. She does not create any complete, complicated or vivid male images to impress or move the audience, because she refuses to give them any chance to express their emotions and thinking from a subjective perspective as an independent individual. The male role, although he is a person, is not a persona, but more like a prop associated to the female role. Furthermore, none of these "simple" men has a charismatic personality or morality, and this compels the audience to forsake them and to lavish their sympathy onto their female counterparts naturally. The director avoids depicting heterosexual relations in detail in order to prevent the male role from getting an equal position as female in the narrative. When Ma has Madame-He referring to her husband as "Xiansheng" (先生)¹⁰ in the voice-over, she distances him from the narrator and simultaneously keeps him apart from the narrative by using this excessively formal appellation. In a nutshell, Ma minimises the narrative proportion and weakens the expressive force of all male characters to protect the female-centred narrative from intrusion by a man. To a great extent, she manages to create a filmic world uniquely for women.

¹⁰ "Xiansheng" is a traditional and formal appellation of husband in Chinese, which is abandoned in most situations today.

4.3 Declining the Male “Gaze”

Mulvey’s remind essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” indicates a gaze paradigm, which splits between male/active and female/passive, in mainstream narrative films.¹¹ According to her, the film apparatus eroticises female images for men’s voyeurism and fetishism. Placing the issue of sexual difference at the centre, Mulvey indicates that cinema is the place of look which highlights a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness and builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.¹² E. Ann Kaplan summarises three “looks” in cinema that demonstrate how the gaze works in the male-dominant cinema:

1. Within the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze;
2. The spectator, in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze, and to objectify the women on the screen;
3. The camera’s original “gaze” comes into play in the very act of filming.¹³

Contrasting with the sexual stereotype in which man takes up the role as “bearer of the look”¹⁴, the camera shots in *Gone Is the One* and *You and Me* avoid male perspectives in every instance. As discussed in 4.2, Ma minimises the possibility of constructing a male agent for the gaze in terms of the narrative. By the same token, she endeavours at the same time to decline the male gaze through intriguing cinematography.

The camera perspective of *Gone Is the One*, as an adaptation of an

¹¹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 14-26.

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 13-14. My summarisation.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

autobiographical novel by Zhang Jie, is always aligned with that of Madame-He who is acting as the writer herself in the story. She appears in almost all the scenes, either in or out of the frames. The only scene without her presence is her mother's dream. However, as she is the first-narrator, even her mother's dream is narrated or imagined by Madame-He herself. Hence, she is physically absent from this scene, but is virtually present in the narrative space. As the narrator, she is everywhere. Except for some establishing shots, the camera predominately moves along with Madame-He's eyes, staring at her mother, husband, and daughter from her perspective, or staring at herself when the voice-over is narrating. Conversely, the male characters in this film are not given power to **look**, because the camera never illustrates their points of view. All the male characters are looked at, whether by an erotic look or not, by the female characters. The frames describing the dialogue between Madame-He and her husband are typical examples. When they are captured in the same frame, Madame-He is positioned on the centre while her husband is placed in a corner of the frame, and shown in a low-key light (Figure 4-3-1). The mise-en-scene of these frames, including the structure, hue and light key, composes a diminished male image. The husband is, in a sense, looked at by Madame-He, the director, and the audience with morally critical eyes.



Figure 4-3-1

We can see a similar camera arrangement in *You and Me*. Unlike *Gone Is the One*, which is narrated by “I”, *You and Me* is narrated by an omnipotent narrator.

Although no female character acts as narrator for the audience, the camera is manoeuvred to record from a female perspective. The camera concentrates on the development and change of the two women's relationship and portrays them identically throughout the film. For example, when depicting their first encounter at the beginning of the film, the director uses several reverse shots. The camera works as the eyes of the two women protagonists respectively; when it scrutinises one face of the two protagonists, it becomes the "eyes" of the other. By contrast, as in *Gone Is the One*, no point of view from the male characters exists in this film. The camera never illustrates Xiao Ma – a lovely young girl who is the potential sexual object for the male character and male audience – from the male's sight. When the old woman tries to make a match for Xiao Ma and her grandson, the director keeps the grandson out of the frame at first, and then uses a long shot to depict him from Xiao Ma's point of view. However, Xiao Ma never appears from his perspective in this depiction of a potential love relationship. Even Xiao Ma's boyfriend does not "look at" her in this film. There are only two scenes in which they appear together: one describing them leaving the old woman's courtyard and another in which Xiao Ma receives a phone call in their new apartment. In the first scene, the director uses four shots amounting to around 30 seconds to position these young lovers together in one frame without conversation. We can see the boy's eyes closely in the first shot which would normally lead to his point-of-view shot, which presumably would be the girl's image, but the following shot is in fact a full shot of both of them (Figure 4-3-2). The shots are not linked on the basis of the boy's sight but rather on the girl's movement. The boy's sight is even more invisible in a later scene while appearing in the background in the one and only shot (Figure 4-3-3).



Figure 4-3-2



Figure 4-3-3

Not only portrayed without the power to look, the male characters are also portrayed without perception. Although there are several close-up shots representing men, these shots do not function to reveal their emotions, but are presented from an omnipotent or a female character's point of view. The director represents the male roles in such a way that their gaze, perception and emotion are neglected intentionally, eliminating the possibility of a male as the agent of the gaze for the male audience. Looking through such a camera presenting an absolutely female perspective, the male audience can hardly find a space to indulge in sexual imagination.

At the same time, none of the women on the screen in these two films, whether the elderly women in their eighties, the middle-aged female writer, or the young girl, function as “sexual objects” from the perspective of Mulvey's model of gaze. Through analysing the camera language in these two films, we can conclude that the

director portrays the female characters neither as “erotic object for the characters within the screen story”, nor as “erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium”.¹⁵ The director shows a preference for realist aesthetics in positioning the camera. We can see the typical realist cinematographic techniques – long takes, depth-of-focus shots, and slow cutting – used in this film.

According to Andre Bazin, montage, as used by Lev Kuleshov or Sergei Eisenstein, “did not give us the event, it alluded to it”¹⁶:

Undoubtedly they derived at least the greater part of the constituent elements from the reality they were describing but the final significance of the film was found to reside in the ordering of these elements much more than in their objective content. The meaning is not in the image, it is in the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator.¹⁷

Just as the montage disturbs the continued narration of the event itself, the close-up shots destroy the integrity of the narrative space. Camera movements and their foci direct the audience’s sight, compelling them to look, to understand, and to think as the director expected. They impose an interpretation of the event more than a presentation of it for the filmic spectator. They can also guide the audience’s gaze on purpose. Thus the film, consisting of long take and depth-of-focus shots and slow cutting can “bring the spectator in closer relation with the image than he is with the reality”¹⁸, therefore, “independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more

¹⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 19.

¹⁶ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

realistic.”¹⁹

Ma shows a perceptible inclination to realist aesthetics in her early works. Watching the head leader of *You and Me* as an example, we can detect this inclination from the camera shots, the editing, the costumes and the make-up. After a landscape of winter in Beijing, Ma uses several long shots to introduce the appearance of the young protagonist of the story – Xiao Ma, whose debut is staged as a two-minute act showing her winding through the snowy streets by bicycle. Frames with simple contents edited in a slow rhythm with traditional Chinese music played by Guqin (古琴)²⁰ announce the unadorned tone of the whole film. Although Xiao Ma is positioned at the centre of interest in all these frames, she is by no means displayed as a sexual object. Instead of using close-up shots and expressionistic montage to direct the audience’s gaze towards Xiao Ma, the director uses long shots and slow cutting from a realist perspective. Moreover, Xiao Ma, as a young woman in her twenties, appears in a heavy military coat with a scarf on her face. The audience cannot even see her face or body shape, except for her innocent eyes (Figure 4-3-4). Even if she will eventually be a sexual object for the male audience in the cinema, the director deliberately avoids the male gaze in her filming process.



¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Guqin is a Chinese traditional instrument.

Figure 4-3-4

In her early works, Ma does not attempt to manoeuvre the camera to turn the women into erotic objects for scopophilic pleasure, but **records** their experiences. Instead of using the cinema as a whole arsenal of manipulative means, the director retains the temporal continuity, special integrity and narrative objectivity in the frames to the greatest extent. She does not **display** the women's roles in a phallus-centric stereotype, but **presents** them in a relatively realistic tone. Though both Ma and Li Yu adopt realist style, the ideology implied is different. Li shows a strong concern of women's living status from a sociological perspective, making her films similar to Italian neo-realist films, which express a democratic spirit with emphasis on the value of ordinary people from a compassionate point of view. By contrast, Ma uses realist cinematography to avoid the male gaze.

Moreover, not content to refuse it, Ma even tries to “damage” men's voyeuristic visual pleasure. As Vanderstaay mentions in her essay, Ma presents a scene of woman bathing in an “unusual” way in *Gone Is the One*:

Ma compels the audience to look at Madame-He bathing her mother. This image is much more ‘unpleasant’ than the typical scopophilic image of the woman bathing to which the audience is accustomed.²¹

The camera stares at the old woman's body without any evasion or beautification (Figure 4-3-5). It is dry and flabby, very hard to imagine as a sexual object. The image is too frank to allow any room for imagination, with no partial shot or artificial light. Ma damages the visual pleasure of female body by forcing the audience to look at this

²¹ Vanderstaay, “Female consciousness in contemporary Chinese women directors’ films”, 7.

unpleasant and unaesthetic image. It seems that she is making a critical comment on both the objectification of women's bodies and audience's erotic expectations. The preference for realist filmic style presented in this film is a rebellion against the eroticism in the orthodox mode of "filming women".



Figure 4-3-5

Furthermore, the significance of Ma's refusal of the male gaze is quite different from that of fifty years ago. In the specific historical period of 1949 through 1966 (the first seventeen years from the establishment of the New China to the beginning of Cultural Revolution), the women in Chinese films, especially in the war films such as *Daughters of China* (中华女儿, *Zhonghus nǚ'er*, dir. Zhai Qiang, 翟强, 1949) and *From Victory to Victory* (南征北战, *Nanzhengbeizhan*, dir. Cheng Yin & Tang Xiaodan, 成荫, 汤晓丹, 1952), were portrayed in a Hua Mulan mode. This mode of female images escapes from the erotic male language and gaze, because it desexualises women; however, it does not result in encouraging women to challenge or negate the patriarchal order. As Dai Jinhua argues, "[a]lthough images of women were no longer objectified by the male desiring 'gaze', women still did not comprise an autonomous gender group apart from men."²² Although these women share the discourse with men in a sense, "it is a discourse that deprives them from their gender identity"²³. As the women have lost their gender distinction, they have lost their voice

²² Dai Jinhua, "Invisible Women", 262.

²³ Ibid., 258.

as well; their only choice is to represent a patriarchal discourse. By contrast, Ma's refusal of the male gaze can be considered as a strong manifestation of female consciousness²⁴. As a female director and a composer of the filmic language in her films, Ma constructs her filmic narration in this way: first, she narrates from the perspective of the female protagonists; second, she ignores the male's look to avoid him emerging as an agent of gaze; third, she portrays the female images in a realist style to prevent them from becoming spectacles, thus largely eliminating the possible existence of a male gaze. Meanwhile, Ma does not blur the gender opposition and distinction between men and women as earlier Chinese filmmakers did in the period of the Seventeen Years (1949-1966), but rather enunciates it. Instead of selecting social, political or historical themes, Ma concentrates on women's individual experience and emotion. The women in her films are no longer symbols of social transformation, advocates of political propaganda, or scapegoats in a historical turmoil, but are real women and self-conscious individuals.

Through analysing the narration, plot and shots in Ma's early works, I come to the following conclusion: Ma encodes her filmic expression in a way that is opposed to the phallus-centred stereotype. Whether or not the audience can see the female consciousness implied in her films, Ma represents it.

²⁴ The concept of "female consciousness" began to be used as a theoretical concept for analysing films from a feminist approach in the 1970s feminist movements. It originated in the eighteenth century, emphasising the importance of women achieving self-awareness and establishing their own identities in opposition to the patriarchal expectations of female identity. From the 1980s, scholarship on female consciousness focuses on how it is composed or represented in a "female language", and how it can be seen in a text.

4.4 Is There a Female Spectator?

In the films structured by the “unconscious of patriarchal society”²⁵ in Mulvey’s approach, it is men who advance the story, controlling the events, the women, and the erotic gaze, while women conversely function as erotic spectacles, interrupting rather than advancing the narrative. In contrast, Ma puts women on the narrative centre while banishing the men from the narrative. In a pattern opposite to the male-centred stereotype, women are absolutely the leading roles advancing the plot, monopolising the position as narrator; however, do they have the corresponding power to gaze at the men? More specifically, has Ma established a female spectatorship while evading a male one?

To answer this question, we need to find out first whether Ma has created any men who have the potential to be the dreamy sexual object for women in her films. As discussed in 4.2, the men in these films are not given any opportunity to show any sexual or spiritual appeal. In terms of appearance, they do not have handsome faces or sexy bodies. In terms of personality and morality, they are selfish, weak, short-sighted and boring. Obviously, these men can hardly function as spectacles to serve in women’s sexual imagination.

Nonetheless, as discussed above, Ma conceals the specific depiction of heterosexual relations, despite their existence. To the director, it seems dangerous to depict a love story or a sexual scene in detail. First, the women’s central position is threatened as soon as a heterosexual love story is described, because a heterosexual romance easily endows the male protagonist with an equal position as that of the female protagonist in the narrative. Additionally, the woman risks being objectivised

²⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 14.

in the erotic gaze of her lover in the film. Even if the director intends to portray her body without sexual implications, a woman cannot escape from being decoded as a “sexual object” in the male audience’s voyeuristic and fetish imagination. Ma therefore evades the depiction of heterosexual relations, so as to protect a female consciousness expressed in her films from being polluted by the emergence of a vivid male lover. However, that desexualises the female characters to some extent. Banished from love relationship and sexual experience, the women lose their desire and gender as well. Similar stories could occur between father and son, or between an old man and a young boy. That is to say, if we change the gender of the protagonists, the story is still tenable. Therefore, the director does not actually construct a filmic discourse uniquely for women, but chooses women as protagonists due to her self-conscious awareness as a woman. Although the reason and purpose of the women’s desexualisation in these films differ from those made during Seventeen Years period, it results in the same concealment of the desire of female characters and blocks the sexual imagination of the female audience. Meanwhile, the underlying discourse is probably similar or even the same. I will verify this hypothesis later in this chapter.

Then, in terms of visual presentation, does Ma provide a perspective for the female gaze through the camera lens? While monopolising the cinematographic perspectives, do these female characters work as agents of the gaze for the film spectators? Within these two films, the most obvious case in which the camera is staring at a man from a woman’s point of view exists in *You and Me*, three times altogether, when Xiao Ma looks at the old landlord’s grandson. In their first encounter, the grandson emerges in a wide-medium shot and then in a close-up respectively, when he and Xiao Ma almost bump into each other at the gate of the courtyard. In terms of camera language, the using of close-up shot focusing on faces usually aims

to: 1. depict the details of the appearance 2. express the emotion 3. create an exaggerated appearance. Laura Mulvey has discussed how close-up shots portray women to be beautiful, sexy, mysterious and seductive sexual beings in the erotic gaze.²⁶ However, does this close-up erotise him for Xiao Ma/female spectators? The camera lens captures him from front face without any beautification: a proper angle is not chosen, and lighting (either artificial or natural) is not arranged to ornament or help sculpture his shape. The close-up, instead of arousing sexual imagination as usual, reveals all the shortcomings of his face (Figure 4-4-1). Such a de-glamorisation of him in his first appearance during this encounter severely destroys his magnetism as favourable sexual object for Xiao Ma/female spectators. Nonetheless, another “trick” can be played to create an erotic gaze via the relations between two shots, because extra meaning, which is not included in either single shot, is usually produced through the combination of two linked shots. In other words, if the director intends to create an erotic gaze towards woman, she could embed it in the next shot of the woman’s face. However, no sexual desire or love expectation is implied in Xiao Ma’s face in the reverse shots of her point of view. While filtering the grandson out of the candidate list of Xiao Ma’s sexual objects, the director does not objectify her boyfriend, though he is the person most likely to be put into her erotic sight due to their understood sexual relationship. Throughout the film, Xiao Ma never “looks” at him within the filmic frame, let alone gazes at him.

²⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Close-ups and Commodities”, in Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 40-50.



Figure 4-4-1

The same pattern is employed in *Gone Is the One*. As narrator and in the leading role, Madame-He is expected to be the surrogate for the gaze for film spectators. However, she does not work as an agent of the gaze while looking at the males, either. Her husband appears only framed in her look as mentioned above; however, it is a look without desire. In one scene depicting the dialogue between the couple, he appears in a medium shot which only displays the upper part of his body, sitting bolt upright with a priggish face, positioned behind a window frame, illuminated by a low-key light (Figure 4-4-2). Through such a frame, Madame-He can only see the outline of his shape and his poker face. What is more, the use of low-key lighting gives him a depressive presence, reflecting Madame-He's configuration of him: plain, obscure, distant, humourless and depressive, none of which is characteristic of an idealised sexual object. Another male role in this film, Dr. Luo, is not eroticised by Madame-He's look either. Their conversation in hospital is extremely rational and professional. The camera, though shooting in a close scale, fixes on the side of his head and is overshadowed by a huge X-ray photo. In addition, Madame-He looks at the X-ray photo much more than at him.



Figure 4-4-2

Within these films, though the male characters are looked at by the female characters, they are not looked at with an erotic gaze. Women in these films cannot form the first filmic “look”, because they only **look at**, but not **gaze at** the men. They do not objectify, or rather, we cannot via their look objectify the men as sexual beings. Therefore, even if the female spectator is led to identify with these women, she cannot constitute her gaze via their looking. Thus the second “look” is hard to form. Meanwhile, the men are never given opportunities to display their bodies in the film, whether they are indeed sexy or not. The camera, or rather the camera controlled by the filmmaker, does not portray them in a to-be-looked-at-ness paradigm. There is no original gaze at men launched by camera, because the director does not attempt to form it with cinematography at all.

No matter how the female audience in the cinema decode these male characters, their image shows no original attempt of the director to objectify them from women’s erotic gaze. Although it is a film with female-centred narrative and perspectives, it cannot create a to-be-looked-at-ness of men that provides filmic visual pleasure whereby the female audience can be erotic spectators. If we can say that the director declines the male gaze, we can also say that she evades the female gaze by the same

token. She desexualises the women in the narrative and once more through camera shots, since the gaze system “is built upon culturally defined notions of sexual difference”²⁷.

This leads to the following questions. If nobody is the spectacle in the film, who is the filmic spectator? Why does Ma fail or refuse to provide room for emerging female spectators in her films? If it is a film without spectatorship, does it mean that a woman’s narrative cannot structure an erotic spectatorship either for men or for women?

At first, Ma’s refusal of the male gaze recognises the existence of gaze per se. As a woman, she cherishes her self-conscious awareness of opposition that drives her to reject sex-role stereotypes formed in patriarchal society which positions women as the spectacle and men as spectator. To refuse the male gaze is to decline the objective identity of women in a male-centred discourse. It is a resistance from women, but it is a resistance within the male discourse. As Foucault observes, “[w]here there is power there is resistance; and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”²⁸ The resistance of Ma, thus, is itself premised on her inevitable self-identification within structure of power with an object.

Furthermore, Ma does not provide a position for women as visual subjects in filmic spectatorship. One of the effective ways to free women from being erotic objects is to discourage men’s sexual imagination, as she does in these films. Yet she does not conversely encourage women’s sexual imaginations either. Ma, therefore, desexualises the women by ignoring, or evading, or even refusing to depict, much less

²⁷ Kaplan, *Women and Film*, 13.

²⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 95.

to satisfy, women's sexual desire. From this perspective, Ma shows no progress vis-à-vis the Chinese filmmakers of the Seventeen Years, although the desexualisation is formed in a different way. Ma does not eliminate sexual difference through creating genderless female images as was done in the past; instead, she constitutes women as an autonomous gender group apart from men. However, the women in this autonomous world are not complete women when depicted without libido. By the same token, she negates the completeness of the female filmic spectator when depriving them of scopophilic visual pleasure. To Ma, the gaze exists, yet it exists only in a male/active and female/passive model. Thus she traps the women in another dilemma, in which they act as neither object nor subject. On one hand, "[a]t the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen"²⁹, and the "I" is there to look at them. To annihilate the stigmatic Otherness engraved in women in a male discourse, Ma removes the to-be-looked-at-ness from them. On the other hand, "the entire cinematographic apparatus is activated in order to provoke this simulation: it is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, a position of the subject, a subject and not reality".³⁰ The gaze, therefore, is owned by the subject, the filmic spectator. Without establishing a spectatorship for the woman, Ma fails to recognise her as a self while denying her the role of the Other in terms of sexuality. The evasion of erotic spectatorship in Ma's films, whether it is a strategic compromise of a director who struggles to make films in a patriarchal society, or a reflection of her own lack, consequently denies the subjective-position of women either on the screen or in the cinema.

²⁹ Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier" *Screen* 16, 2 (1975): 51.

³⁰ Jean-Louis Braude, "The Apparatus", 222.

4.5 An Isolated World for Women: Is It an Achievement After All?

What is more, the filmic representations in these two films shut the door not only to men, but also to the society and the outside world. First of all, the chosen filmic location – the space working as true background in which the story occurs – is relatively isolated. There are three major settings in *Gone Is the One*, namely, Madame-He's apartment, her mother's house and the hospital. The first two settings are both indoor and private spaces, in which only several family members emerge, including Madame-He, her mother, her husband and the nursemaid. Although the hospital is a kind of public location, the narrative space is fenced between Madame-He and her mother. The main characters have less communication with other people there (other patients, nurses, doctors, etc.), except some dialogue around the mother's illness. The female protagonists do not even look at other people via the camera. To access the original work, which is an autobiographic novel, Ma adopts a voice-over of the first-person, that is, the "I". The voice-over of "I" brings the audience into her interior mental world, but simultaneously constrains our sight within hers.

Similarly, the narrative space of *You and Me* is more isolated, in that almost the whole story occurs in a courtyard, except for some exterior shots functioning as transitional scenery. How does the outside world, that is, the world that corresponds to the "society", appear in these several cursory shots? Theoretical analyses aside, I was bewildered by the perception of time when watching these two films. And it does not just confuse me. When one of my friends and I watched *You and Me* together, we could not be consistent with each other in identifying the historical background of the story until a close-up shot of a calendar at the end of the film disclosed the time, although both of us were born and grew up in China, and thus are familiar with the

contemporary context there. Furthermore, my friend was actually studying in Beijing in 2001, where and when the story was set. Ma depicts the exterior world with the following two techniques: 1. a full-shot within which only the protagonist is moving; 2. a shallow-focus shot moving along with her. In the first technique, the background is displayed clearly but the moving character receives the emphasis of the frame. In the second one, the background is obscure when the camera is focusing on the character. That is the reason why we could not recognise the time accurately in spite of our knowledge of the local context. The camera always and only concentrates on the characters, describing them without any information related to the social background – for example, TV programmes, popular music broadcast in shops, advertisements displayed on the street, and so on. Moreover, the costumes, decorations, props and dialogues also led us to a wrong conclusion. Though these films are shot in a realist cinematographic style, we cannot see the state or hear the voice of the real and temporal society in these films. Ma does not elaborate on the time and social background, because it is not essential to a conventional women's story. Women, being regarded as unproductive and uncreative creatures in male discourse³¹, with lives that are not considered in the present tense but in a relatively static state, are not so relevant to the time. Ma ignores the correlation between a women's story and the social status quo, even if it is a quasi-autobiographical story of herself. If we compare the experience of the director with that of the girlish protagonist in the film, Xiao Ma, and the actress starring in it, Gong Zhe, we could find several similarities between these three. Either on or off screen, Gong Zhe is a college student majoring in photography who is studying in Beijing in her twenties, which makes her similar to the director who studied film directing in Beijing.

³¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 95.

Nevertheless, Ma Liwen is not a local resident of Beijing and has experienced the same tenement experience as Xiao Ma. It is thus a film at least partially based on the director's personal experience, though she does not claim so. She cannot even help naming the girlish protagonist with her own family name. In addition, when Ma was asked the reason of choosing an unprofessional actress (as mentioned above, Gong Zhe is a major in photography, not performance) to star in her film, Ma explains that "because her innocent eyes remind me of that innocent time"³². To some extent, Ma plunges into nostalgia via her filmmaking, while Gong Zhe (also Xiao Ma) acts as a shadow of the director in her undergraduate study. As the director and the original model of the protagonist in the film as well, she keeps the camera tracking after Xiao Ma/herself, describing "her" experience, concentrating on "her" feelings. Nevertheless, she isolates her nostalgia in a closed space.

Therefore, Ma's filmic presentation is very feminine: the films are all and only about women. In order that the woman is not the "pseudo-centre of the filmic discourse"³³, the director is forced to repress the idea of woman as a social and sexual being, that is, her Otherness. However, it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, she frees women from the destiny of being sexual objects for the male gaze or being "empty signifiers" for male historical and social narratives. On the other hand, her refusal to describe the libido and sociality of women simultaneously confines women to their immanence. She can neither create the female characters nor satisfy the female audience, nor consider herself as a complete woman. More specifically, in her films, woman herself is a sign of lack. When she keeps her individuality, she has to lose her instinctive sexual desire and her sociality at the same time. Woman's

³² Web article, "Ma Liwen Talking about Gong Zhe on the Opening of University Student Film Festival (《我们俩》揭幕大影节, 马俐文当众揭底宫哲)", accessed July 6, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2008-05-14/15582026215.shtml>.

³³ Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", 34.

individuality and self-awareness, therefore, can only exist in narcissism. By building an isolated world unique for women, she hides the women (including herself) in an interior world to indulge in narcissism. Here woman's narcissism differs from that which focuses on physical charms, for it is defined in the sense of mentality and morality. Now we can understand why the personality and morality of the male characters are portrayed collectively and negatively, opposite to those of their female counterparts. Rather than a female resistance, this is what reveals her limitation, as Dai Jinhua states, "all the attempts to represent and express the female are confined to the formation of positive female images and fail to construct a truly oppositional or subversive discourse".³⁴ Furthermore, in order to prevent men from occupying the centre of the universe in a text which focuses on women's lives, experiences and mental world, Ma denies the man/woman binary opposition altogether. Instead, an opposition of female/non-female is posed in the films. There is no male spectacle objectified in the films, because the director, as a woman, is not (confident of being) able to control them. To her, men are powerful. It is also the power that forms her and forms the discourse within which she resists. Thus, she positions men in an absence, "an absence which is simultaneously negated and recuperated by man"³⁵. That is the paradox demonstrated by Foucault: "Women are produced by patriarchal power at the same time that they resist it."³⁶ In other words, her filmmaking, if we can regard it as a sort of power game of sexuality, is a game played within the "mechanics of power"³⁷. It is the "discipline" in the Foucauldian model, which defines "how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes,

³⁴ Dai Jinhua, "Invisible Women", 274.

³⁵ Johnston "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", 34.

³⁶ Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, 101.

³⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

but so that they may operate as one wishes”.³⁸ Foucault further indicates that “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space”³⁹ and simultaneously “regulates the cycle of repetition”⁴⁰. Ma, now as a human being with a “docile body”⁴¹, is functioning as an atom within such a disciplinary machine through her filmmaking. Whenever she cognises herself or creates women in her works, she does so within this disciplinary machine.

However, despite the fact that Ma plays this power game of gender/sex within male discourse, does this mean that she totally fails in this game? The truth is that these two extremely feminine films are bringing her attention, fame, recognition and opportunity for future filmmaking. In her filmic representation, she implicitly states: “I am a woman director, I can only tell women’s stories from a woman’s perspective, and I present them in a very feminine way”. She admits her immanent lack as a woman while she is portraying the women but ignoring the men, history and society around them. Through emphasising her gender/sex, and even her immanent lack, as a woman, she achieves the power to **speak**.

From the inception of feminist film studies, many feminist theories began to criticise the fact that woman is “absent” in mainstream cinema. First, woman is a structural absence in the filmic narrative when displayed as an erotic object for the

³⁸ Ibid., 138.

³⁹ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁴¹ The term is from Foucault, it means that the human body, which was entering a machinery of power, is produced by the discipline. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

characters within the screen story as well as for the spectator within the auditorium⁴². Second, woman's historical and cultural position is one of absence from the dominant cultural forms. In historical and social narrative, she acquires her identification and representation as a metaphor for the social status. In a nutshell, "woman as woman is largely absent"⁴³ within a sexist ideology and a male-dominant cinema: she is "presented as what she represents for man"⁴⁴, as a sexual object for male voyeurism and fetishism, or as a sign for men's internal deficiency or terror of castration. Woman functions as an "empty signifier",⁴⁵ whose signified conforms to the standards of men.

Ma composes her works in a way opposite to that of the mainstream cinema mentioned above. Her early films demonstrate a strong self-conscious resistance to the phallo-centric stereotype through the manipulation of filmic language. At first, she constructs a female-centred narrative to present women's perspectives. Meanwhile, she elaborately prevents women's images from being sexual objects for the male voyeuristic and fetish gaze via the cinematography, whether or not this works in the auditorium. The primary method of resistance she uses is to shut the men out: to exclude them from the narrative, obscure their image from the frame, and eliminate their sight through camera manipulation. In this way, man is prevented from being seen as a sexy, positive, or complicated human being. It seems that Ma dares not create a man with charming characteristics (either physical or mental characteristics), who could be gazed at as a sexual object by the female spectators. This results in a desexualisation of the women on the both sides of the screen. Furthermore, the

⁴² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 19. Original text: "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen."

⁴³ Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The term is from Dai Jinhua's "Invisible Women", 265.

women's stories in Ma's compositions are closed, either in the sense of the factual narrative space or the mental one. She endeavours to deliver the female consciousness via film creation, but it can only be presented when the women's stories as well as the women themselves are isolated from men, society, and the outside world. Therefore, to borrow an incisive metaphor from Dai Jinhua, Ma traps herself as well as the female characters in her films into a dilemma of "fleeing from one trap while falling into another"⁴⁶.

Ma endeavours to create a world unique for woman in her works, but her filmic representation is imprisoned in a discursive cage of the gender/sex of woman. However, the fact is that Ma is capable of constructing a filmic representation from a gender-neutral perspective, as shown in her later work *Lost and Found* (我叫刘跃进, Wojiao liuyuejin, 2008) which is a commercial comedy displaying no femininity either in its story or its visual presentation. However, the film has not received much attention, compared with another of Ma's film released in the same year *Desires of the Heart* (桃花运, Taohuayun, 2008), which presents an obvious femininity. Thus, in her filmmaking techniques, Ma actually has a choice about displaying femininity or not. However, she can only speak within the "discursive formation", that is, "a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as to those of resistance".⁴⁷ From this aspect, she has no choice but to compose a feminine or so-called feminist filmic representation. To achieve discursive power, she needs to emphasise her name as "woman", to display her immanent lack as woman, even to "perform" the fact that she cannot speak out of the discursive cage manufactured by male discourse. So, where have all the men gone? Actually, they

⁴⁶ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 138.

⁴⁷ Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, 43.

have never gone, they are right here.

Chapter 5

Melancholy Songs of Women:

Women's Tragedies Directed by Women

This chapter will focus on two films which both are devoted to describing women's tragic experiences and living dilemmas, namely, Li Yu's *Dam Street* and Xu Jinglei's *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Both female directors emerged in Chinese film arena in the early 2000s. Their films also share the following common characteristics. First, in terms of morality, the female protagonists in these films are more respectable than the male roles. Second, the women have a commitment to their love, but the men do not, whether as lover or mother, women sacrifice themselves. Third, all the female roles in these films endure an experience of suffering and a tragic destiny. And the directors ascribe these women's tragedies to men's selfishness and weakness, social prejudice and sexual unfairness, or to destiny itself.

I will analyse *Dam Street* and *A Letter from an Unknown Woman* around the issue of subjectivity and argue, in 5.2 and 5.3 respectively, why they prefer to choose women's tragedies as their filmic themes. The title "women's tragedies directed by women" has two meanings. First of all, all these films directed by women tell stories of women's tragedies. And second, in my opinion, the directors direct in ways that deliberately exaggerate the miserable reality of women's lives. I seek to answer why women's films tend to be narrated in a tragic tone. Furthermore, the physical attraction of these two female directors is also an interesting cultural phenomenon.

Unlike their predecessors who collectively mobilised a Hua Mulan model in their career lives, Li Yu and Xu Jinglei have never concealed their sexual features as women. Therefore, in 5.4, I will discuss whether their appearance is a kind of cultural or commercial strategy.

5.1 Synopsis of the Selected Films

A Letter from an Unknown Woman is based on the novel of the same title written by famous Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942). It is the second film directed by Xu Jinglei, a young female director who debuted as an actress in Chinese film and TV and then engaged in film directing after gaining some reputation. The story begins with a man (played by Jiang Wen, 姜文) receiving a letter from an unknown woman (Xu Jinglei) on his forty-first birthday. In the letter, she tells him the story of her love for him: a life-long passion that has never diminished over time, but one that he has never known about. Her story spans eighteen years from the moment she sets her eyes on her new neighbour – the male protagonist – when she is a thirteen years old girl. From then on, she harbours a secret admiration toward him until her death. She recalls their brief but passionate love when she was thirteen years old, the hardship she goes through raising their child alone, and their final encounter after the war, during which the man fails to recognize her and leaves her in despair once again. Now, having lost her son, she no longer has the courage to live on. Only in a letter is she capable of telling him everything, for the first and the last time. Shaken by the letter, the man searches his memory for the nameless woman.

Xu Jinglei works as the director and the leading actor as well. She follows the original novel closely in her film, except for moving the story background from Vienna to Beijing, where she was born and grew up.

Dam Street is Li Yu's second feature film. The film opens in a little village in the early 1980s with an unwanted pregnancy. Sixteen, beautiful and involved with another student, Yun (played by Liu Yi, 刘谊) manages to keep her swelling belly hidden until nearly the end of the school term, when she and her secret are discovered in a school bathroom. The school expels the lovers and trumpets their "moral decadence" on loudspeakers that blast the news throughout their small village. The boy leaves to become a carpenter's apprentice; Yun stays and delivers a baby that her mother tells her is dead. Ten years later, Yun is still living in that little village and becomes a singer working in a small variety troupe. In time, she befriends one of her mother's students, a ten-year-old boy named Xiao Yong, who eagerly catches her attention. Being tortured by the love relationship with a married man, Yun turns to treat the boy with a tenderness that wavers perilously from maternal to carnal in aching loneliness. The denouement of the film is a dramatic discovery of Yun that Xiao Yong is the boy she gave birth to ten years ago.

5.2 Another Gaze: All about Her

As one among the several women directors making films sustainably in contemporary China, Li Yu's directs films that have been acclaimed as "New

Feminist Films” (新女性主义电影, *xinnüxingzhuyi dianying*)¹ and as representative works of the “New Wave of Chinese Feminist Film” (中国女性电影新浪潮, *zhongguo nüxingdianying xinlangchao*)². Rather than her gender/sex, it is her unrelenting concentration on the living condition of contemporary Chinese women, especially women belonging to vulnerable and marginal groups, that brings her the fame as an artistic and feminist director. She shows her concern for the survival dilemma of female homosexuals in China in her maiden work *Fish and Elephant*. *Dam Street* tells the story about a girl who first experiences a premarital pregnancy in her teenage years and is entangled in an adulterous relationship with a married man ten years later, describing her traumatic life in a little village suffering from the disgrace of sexual scandals and the anguish of losing her own baby. Liu Pingguo (by Fan Bingbing, 范冰冰), the female protagonist in Li’s latest works *Lost in Beijing* (苹果, 2007), is a young woman migrating from northeast China to Beijing with her husband (by Tong Dawei, 佟大为). Like most ordinary immigrants from less developed regions, the young couple live in a dilapidated apartment eking out their existence by working menial jobs and dreaming of a better life. As one of millions of migrant female labourers, Liu Pingguo is negligible and vulnerable in the metropolis, especially when her husband – the only person she can rely on in Beijing – puts her and her unborn baby into an immoral deal. In short, all of the female protagonists in Li’s films are vulnerable, insulted and hurt by men, struggling for their existence in a different dilemma. Moreover, to both film critics and the audience, Li Yu is an insubordinate and pioneer female artist. The most obvious manifestation is that two of

¹ Guo Zeqing and Zhang Fangming both claim Li Yu’s films as feminist films in their essays. Guo Zeqing, “The Modern Women’s Films in China, the Existence of Women and Their Future”, 73. Zhang Fangming, “Stranding and Breaking Through”.

² Lin Weimin categories Li Yu’s films into “New Wave of Chinese Feminist Film”. Lin Weimin, “The Emergency of New Wave of Chinese Feminist Film (中国女性电影新浪潮的崛起)”, *Dianying yishu* 4 (2006): 126.

her works are forbidden to be released in China by the Chinese film bureau. As mentioned in Chapter 3, *Fish and Elephant* was banned in mainland China because of its focus on homosexuality. In 2007, her most high profile film, *Lost in Beijing*, premiered at the 57th Berlin International Film Festival. However, the result was over a year of controversy with the Chinese Film Bureau over both the appropriateness of that screening and the content of the film. The core of the issue is the depiction of sexual scenes in the film. Though briefly screened in a heavily edited version and released in DVD version for short term³, the film was eventually banned outright, except a limited release abroad.

5.2.1 Her-story: a sober narrative

As discussed above, Li Yu is a representative and distinctive female artist in contemporary China whose works keep telling women's stories. In summarising the characteristics of narrative and cinematography in her films, I metaphorise her filmic narrative of women's stories into **her-story** (她传, Tazhuan). The term "her-story" here is to be distinguished from "herstory", which was coined in the late 1960s as part of a feminist critique of conventional historiography. "Her-story" is the gender counterpart of "his-story", but not "history". In contrast with "herstory" which is opposite to "history", "her-story" corresponds to "my-story". While "my-story" refers to the story of the author, "her-story" refers to that of someone else. Since the

³ According to the news on website of Eastday, there was legal DVD version of *Lost in Beijing* available but soon recalled by the government for the following reasons:

1. the DVD version does not delete the erotic content according to the comment of the Film Bureau;
2. the film was sent to exhibit in the 57th Berlin International Film Festival in the version which had not been censored;
3. the releaser promoted the film with an unhealthy and improper advertisement.

Accessed Aug. 6, 2009. <http://enjoy.eastday.com/e/20080109/u1a3338766.html>.

protagonists of all the films in this thesis are female, this “someone else” is definitely “her”. In order to avoid the confusion between “her-story” and “herstory”, I separate the two words “her” and “story” by a hyphen. I will demonstrate the reasons and further discuss whether a female discourse exists or not in her films through analysing *Dam Street*, the film which is applauded for its feminist spirit not only by mass audience on the internet but also by scholars in academia. (It is undeniable that *Dam Street* gets more attention than other two films directed by Li Yu, because it is the only one released in China.).

As some theorists state, Li Yu persists in observing women’s status quo in a realistic tone from an objective standpoint. Both Zhang Fangming and Yin Yaru indicate in their essays that the “sober narrative” (冷静叙事, Lengjing xushi) is a signature feature in Li Yu’s filmic style.⁴ It is also one of the reasons for naming her films as her-stories in this thesis.

Li Yu to some extent inherits the spirit of Italian Neorealism (1942-1951)⁵ ideologically and stylistically in her film creation. The movement Neorealism was launched in 1940s, in which the most important feature of the films is a documentary visual style. Specifically, the characteristics of Italian neorealist films are: the use of actual locations rather than studio sites; the use of nonprofessional actors; the use of conversational speech rather than literary dialogue; avoidance of artifice in editing,

⁴ Zhang Fangming, “Stranding and Breaking Through”; Yin Yaru, “Where the Pretty Face Be Now: The Feminine Expression from *Dam Street* to *Lost In Beijing* (红颜今何在——从《红颜》到《苹果》的女性表达)”, *Dianying pingjie* 5 (2009), accessed Aug. 3, 2009, <http://qkzz.net/Magazine/1002-6916/2009/05/>.

⁵ The term “neorealism” was coined by the Italian film critic Umberto Barbaro in referring to four films made in 1942. The Italian neorealist films came at a time when the “Seventh Art” had reached its peak in Europe in terms of audience and popularity, and at a time when the ideas of the Left were exceptionally powerful. The neorealists, represented by Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti, bought Italian cinema international prestige. Bordwell & Thompson, *Film Art*, 316; Robin Buss, *Italian Films* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1989), 34-35.

camerawork, and lighting.⁶ *Dam Street*, as well as two other films of Li Yu's, follows linear narrative sequencing. Li avoids using artificial narrative techniques, such as digression and flashback, to disturb the timeline of the plot progression. The story develops in a linear, integral and clear manner. In terms of mise-en-scene, the director chooses actual locations and natural rather than artificial lighting, and uses long wide-angle shots rather than close-ups. The dialogue is spoken in Sichuan dialect – colloquial and local. The female actor Liu Yi who plays the protagonist Yun in the film is not a professional film actor. With no training in film performance, her acting is natural, and being an actor of Chuan Opera (川剧, Chuanju), when she plays a girl studying Chuan Opera in the film, her talents on and off-screen are consistent. All these filmic works tend toward the raw roughness of documentaries.

To state that Li's films are "sober narratives" is more related to her detached attitude in narration. In spite of concentrating on women's stories, Li has never involved herself in her narratives. Compared with another female director Ma Liwen who is also inclined to a realistic cinematographic style⁷, Li Yu's cinematography is more objective. Employing a certain amount of point-of-view shots, Ma portrays the perspectives of the female roles and herself through the camera lens.⁸ The camera, which is the surrogate eyes of the director and the female protagonist at the same time, intermingles their feelings and emotions. Ma projects her personal feeling and emotion into the female protagonists, or, rather, she partially identifies herself with them. From this aspect, Ma's filmic narratives tell a kind of "my-story". Conversely, the camera manoeuvred by Li works only as the agent of the look for the director. In analysing the camera shots in *Dam Street*, as well as her two other films, I find that Li

⁶ Bordwell & Thompson, *Film Art*, 316-317. My summary.

⁷ See the details in 4.3.

⁸ Ibid.

is not inclined to use point-of-view shots or close-ups. Most shots in *Dam Street* demonstrate an omnipotent perspective. As the director, she **looks at** the female protagonist and **displays** her dilemma rationally and objectively while hiding behind the camera. In a scene describing Yun's pregnancy uncovered in school, Li pictures the girl who is scared and huddling herself up in a profile (Figure 5-2-1). Through portraying her face from the side in dark light, the camera displays her panic, fragility and helplessness from an outside perspective, but does not express her own feeling. Although the shot delivers emotional information, the shot per se is not emotional. Furthermore, Li tries to keep a certain distance between the female protagonist and herself. When showing Yun eating an apple in bed without expression after she is insulted and hit in public⁹, Li uses a wide-angle shot instead of a close-up, which is more commonly seen in such situations (Figure 5-2-2). Furthermore, a curtain hangs between Yun and the lens, separating her from the director as well as the audience. Hidden by the semitransparent curtain, the frame is abnormally silent and calm. Li, therefore, tells "her-story" in her film through detaching herself from the female protagonist. Through the camera lens, Li acts as an outsider of the story looking at the women on the screen with sober eyes.

⁹ The wife of Yun's lover, lined up with her family, insult and hit Yun when she is performing on the stage.



Figure 5-2-1



Figure 5-2-2

5.2.2 To gaze for my identity

Admittedly, Li's objectivity in filmic narrative is proportionally due to her several years experience of documentary production. As she says in an interview, her experience of documentary production enlightens her on how to find the reality

(through video works).¹⁰ However, in my opinion, the look of the camera manoeuvred by Li is not only rational but also superior. In *Dam Street*, Li shows a preference for high angle that overlook her female characters. It is undeniable that high-angle shots help to create an oppressive atmosphere, which is the dominant tone throughout the film, and to exhibit the fragility and weakness of the character. For example, to display Yun's desperate situation when being insulted and hit by the woman who is the wife of Yun's lover, the director uses two overhead shots – one wide-angle and one close-up respectively (Figure 5-2-3 & 5-2-4). However, in Li's films, "overlook" is not only a kind of cinematographic technique, but also the way she looks at the female characters. As Yin Yaru indicates, "the director bends over to display the relations between a vulnerable woman and the society."¹¹ To bend over is her narrating pose. In other words, Li is gazing at the female protagonist in her film, which is not a male gaze or an erotic gaze, but a privileged gaze towards the inferior group. This gaze is similar to the one in the post-colonialist approach. "Western depictions of the 'Orient' construct an inferior world, a place of backwardness, irrationality, and wildness. This allowed the 'West' to identify themselves as the opposite of these characteristics; as a superior world that was progressive, rational, and civil."¹² The westerners gaze at the easterners as the inferior and the Other, while a western identity works as an intellectual lens. The gaze here reflects the social power-structure – the nature of the relations between the gazer and the gazed at – that tells us who has the right and need to look at whom. In this sense, Li Yu is a gazer controlling the filmic looking. She assumes the socio-cultural position of the elites, a

¹⁰ Web article, "Li Yu: I Am a Trouble Maker (《红颜》导演李玉: 我是“麻烦”制造者)", accessed Aug. 3, 2009, <http://news.163.com/06/0125/13/28ALR1E70001122D.html>. Chinese original: 拍摄纪录片让李玉懂得怎样找到真实。

¹¹ Yin Yaru, "Where the Pretty Face Be Now". 导演以一个俯身观照的姿态向我们展示了一个卑微弱小的女性和整个社会的微妙关系。

¹² Joanne P. Sharp, *Geographies of Postcolonialism*, (London: Sage, 2008), 18.

much higher status than that of the female protagonists in her films, and then gazes at them from a superior perspective. The camera shots demonstrate her superior gaze from the very beginning of *Dam Street*. In the first scene, when Yun submerges her body into cold water in a little river, the camera lens looks at her from a top perspective and positions her face upside down in the frame (Figure 5-2-5). The unusual composition of the picture, which can convey instinctively uncomfortable feelings, creates an alienation effect between Yun and Li. She avoids indulging herself into the role by keeping her eyes being omnipotent and objective in narrative. It seems to be an undertone of Li: “it is her feelings, her story, not mine.”



Figure 5-2-3



Figure 5-2-4



Figure 5-2-5

Obviously, Li is a director who prefers to present herself as artistic, not necessarily commercial. Therefore, the intention of her gazing at the women in her

films seems not for the sake of box-office. She does not intend to eroticise them as sexual objects for men, though they are quite likely to be eroticised eventually in the cinema, especially within her exposed depiction of sexual scenes. Through gazing at “her” and “her-story” from the camera lens, Li sets up a **symbolic identification** between her and “I”. Slavoj Žižek divides the identification into two types, that is, imaginary identification and symbolic identification. In Žižek’s words:

[I]n **imaginary identification** we imitate the other at the level of resemblance – we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are “like him”, while in **symbolic identification** we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable at the point which eludes resemblance.¹³

Li Yu emerges with an image of an independent woman with strong female consciousness in the contemporary Chinese cinema arena. Whether she is a feminist or not, she poses as one. By contrast, all the women in her films – either Yun in *Dam Street* or Liu Pingguo in *Lost in Beijing* who are coming from a lower social stratum and educational background – can serve as role models for women who lack female self-awareness, and are shackled into the traditional women’s destiny as victims. Although she keeps telling women’s stories, they are simultaneously stories of the Other. The following still from *Dam Street* (Figure 5-2-6) is a typical gaze of symbolic identification. The eyes of the camera are authorised to be superior via catching the image of mother and daughter from an overhead perspective, through a long and narrow passage. The images of two women are small and restricted in the frame. What is more, the lens stares at them from behind. It is hard for people to imagine a view of their own backs, because it is not the normal way to see themselves.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 109.

Hence it is a scrutiny, a gaze. As a director having power to manoeuvre the camera, Li is studying, examining, criticising and scrutinising the female roles in her films with the unspoken message that she is certainly not ‘one of them’. In other words, she gets access to a self-identification as subject through objectivising these women into the Other.



Figure 5-2-6

Why, then, does she enthusiastically represent women’s tragedies? Furthermore, why is she obsessed in speaking for the powerless? She pours out great sympathy for their living dilemmas created by men and the sexually unequal society while she simultaneously gazes at them as the Other. This raises the question “Why does the writing of national culture in modern China take the form of an aesthetic preoccupation with the powerless?”, which was posed by Rey Chow in the case study of Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children* (孩子王, Haiziwang, 1987). Chow concludes:

If the construction of national culture is a form of empowerment, then the powerless provides a means of aesthetic transaction through which a certain emotional stability arises from observing the powerless as a spectacle. In this

spectacle, the viewer can invest a great amount of emotional energy in the form of sympathy; at the same time, this sympathy becomes the concrete basis of an affirmative national culture precisely because it secures the distance from the powerless per se.¹⁴

Therefore, Li's concentration on women's tragedies is exactly how she empowers herself. All the women in her films can be categorised into the "subaltern". Gayatro Spivak states, the subaltern cannot speak.¹⁵ While speaking for the subaltern, Li simultaneously grasps the power of speaking which "itself belongs to an already well-defined structure and history of domination"¹⁶. What we can see in her filmic narrative is how she acts as the voice of the voiceless women and resolves their dilemmas by pointing them toward a blank future. The last scene of *Dam Street* is a train pulling out of the town where Yun has lived, resembling what Li did in *Lost in Beijing*. Li repeatedly portrays the resolution of women's dilemmas as a mode of "Nora's leaving home", which is the end of Henrik Ibsen's¹⁷ (1828-1906) drama *A Doll's House*, and which has become a symbol for the arousal of women's self-consciousness. This recalls Eileen Chang's¹⁸ (张爱玲, Zhang Ailing, 1920-1995) critique which alludes to the apotheosis of "Nora's leaving home" during the May Fourth period ("五四"时期, Wusi shiqi) in China. In contrast with the feminists at that time who considered leaving home as a bold step of women's revolution, Chang wrote a script entitled *Go Upstairs* to answer the question that "where will Nora go after she

¹⁴ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 135-136.

¹⁵ Gayatro Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak by challenging precisely the optimistic view that the subaltern has already spoken in essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308.

¹⁶ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 36.

¹⁷ *A Doll's House* (aka. *Nora*) is an 1879 play by Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828—1906), who was a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet.

¹⁸ Eileen Chang was an acclaimed and influential female writer in China during from 1940s to 1950s.

leaves home”, to demonstrate the dilemma of feminist movements. Zhang writes, “Go! Go upstairs! And come down as soon as you hear the summons for dinner.”¹⁹ Thus, Nora/women’s leaving home is rather a posture of women’s rebellion than a solution to women’s dilemma. So, when an author urges Nora/women to leave home, he/she rather claims a privilege as the superior, the enlightener and the saviour.

Stuart Hall indicates that identification in a discursive approach is “a construction, a process never complete”. “It is not determined in the sense that it can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, sustained or abandoned.”²⁰ In his opinion:

[Identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).²¹

Therefore, what Li constructs via her filmic narrative is an identity. Through gazing at the women and speaking for the subaltern, she wins an identity as “the director”, the artist and intellectual, who possesses discursive privileges.

5.3 (Auto)Biography?! My-Story of the Other

Xu Jinglei’s film *A Letter from an Unknown Woman* is adapted from the novel

¹⁹ Eileen Chang, “Go! Go Upstairs”, in *Zhang Kan*, (Beijing: Jingjiribao chubanshe, 2002), 359. Chinese original:

“走！走到楼上去”——开饭的时候，一声呼唤，他们就会下来的。

²⁰ Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

with the same title written by Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942)²². Since it is a film focusing on women by woman, it is controversial in its feminist approach in China. Some Chinese critics – such as Guo Zeqing, Dong Ningning, Dai Sichun – consider it a feminist film by claiming, “it is demonstrating from a female standpoint opposite to the male culture”²³ and “putting more attention on the return of women’s subjectivity”²⁴. Meanwhile, some others argue that in spite of narrating from a woman’s standpoint, the subjectivity of the woman is still “shaded”²⁵, “imaginary”²⁶ and “absent”²⁷. Leaving aside the concept “feminist film”, I am interested in the subjectivity of Xu Jinglei embodied in her film in which she acts in a leading role as well as directs. Meanwhile, Xu’s film is not the first filmic version of Zweig’s novel *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, which was adapted by Max Ophuls (1902-1957)²⁸ in 1948 in the United States. The whole novel is a letter written by a woman to the man whom she loves deeply but who has never remembered her. It is a fictional work with a first-person narrator. Both film adaptations directed by an eastern woman and a western man respectively, maintain the first-person narrative to construct a quasi-autobiographical narrative mode via the female protagonist’s voice-over. However, although Xu and Ophuls both tell the story as “I” – the female protagonist – their

²² Stephan Zweig was an Austrian novelist, playwright, journalist and biographer.

²³ Guo Zeqing, “The Modern Women’s Films in China”, 73.

²⁴ Dai Sichun, “The mis-Recognition and Breakthrough of Women’s Film – *Human, Woman, Demon, Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and *Perpetual Motion* in Text Analysis (女性电影的误识和突围——《人鬼情》《一个陌生女人的来信》《无穷动》的文本分析)”, *Dongjing wenxue* 1 (2009).

²⁵ Ge Yanfeng, “From Novels to Movies: Still Shaded Female——Taking the Case of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (从小说到电影：依旧被遮蔽的女性——以《一个陌生女人的来信》为例)”, *Dianying pingjie* 10 (2009): 36.

²⁶ Yu Qunfang, “From Electra to Narcissus: A Reading of *Father and I* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (从恋父到自恋——解读《我和爸爸》和《一个陌生女人的来信》)”, *Dangdai dianying* 4 (2006): 144.

²⁷ Tang Jialin, “*Letter from an Unknown Woman*: Female Discourse in Chinese Film (在看与被看之间——由《一个陌生女人的来信》看中国电影女性话语存在的可能性)”, *Dangdai dianying* 2 (2006): 138.

²⁸ Max Ophuls was an influential German-born film director who worked in Germany, the United States and France and made nearly thirty films. He worked in the United States as a director from 1941 to 1950 when he made the film *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

identification with her and their self-identification are constituted somewhat differently. In this section, I will compare these two film adaptations of the same novel to analyse Xu's subjectivity as "I" – as the role, the director and Xu Jinglei herself.

5.3.1 On both sides of the lens

In Ophuls's film, though the plot development is led by the voiceover of the female protagonist, the camera moves along with the eyes, whether authentic or imaginary, of the male protagonist. From the first scene of the film, Ophuls starts to construct a male look on the screen by arranging the lens to focus on the man's face to describe his expression when receiving a letter from an unknown woman. Then he continuously inserts shots of the man – many close-ups included – to depict his feelings and emotions when reading the letter within the whole narrative. The story presented by Ophuls is about how a man reads a letter from an unknown woman. As Silverman states, "she springs to life as an embodied voice-over ...however ... her voice exists only in and through his consciousness"²⁹. While the male protagonist is reading a beautiful love tragedy written by a woman claiming to be a victim of love, Ophuls cannot help looking at her body through the camera lens, enjoying her sacrificed love with his commiserative tears, and then sculpting her to be the perfect woman whom he wants and needs. Nevertheless, though he indulges in the idea of perfect love, he does not forget to make a moral and religious judgment about the married woman who has an illicit affair by hinting at an indirect relation between her unchaste status and her son's death. Thus, though the body of the film concerns the story of the woman, it would appear that her story is really a story of and for the

²⁹ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 58.

man.³⁰ The so-called “I” in the voiceover is the narrator in name only, because she is the Other to the director, undeniably. As a man, Ophuls tells the story with a voice of “I” – the woman, however, identifies with “you” – the man reading the letter. Though he constructs the film into an autobiographical narrative form, he actually describes a her-story, furthermore, a story of the Other.

In contrast to Ophuls who identifies himself with the man reading the letter, Xu Jinglei identifies herself with the woman writing it. In Xu’s film, the voiceover of the female protagonist, Jiang, is heard continually throughout the whole film narrative, as compared with that in Ophuls’ version, which emerges intermittently at certain points to introduce the narrative chapters. In other words, the images are designed to illustrate Jiang’s confession. Except for the beginning and the end of the film, the man never appears without the woman. That is to say, he is present only in Jiang’s memory. Some may argue that even so, Jiang’s memory itself represented on the screen is probably generated by the man’s imagination. While this is possible generally, it is not tenable in this case, because Xu’s cinematography has not given the man, the “you” in the woman’s voice, any power to look, or to be an active subject. Even in the first scene when the woman (either her voice or image) has not yet entered the narrative, the lens does not endow him with subjectivity. He first appears within an establishing shot, and then comes towards the lens with extreme backlighting. When he is talking with his chamberlain or reading the letter, the camera is mobilised to capture everything around him such as the yard, the lamp, the noodles, the stove and the letters, but it never focuses on his face. Throughout the film, the camera deliberately ignores his look. The specific techniques that the director employs are to:

³⁰ Tania Modleski argues the existence of woman’s film in Hollywood through analysing Ophuls’ *Letter from an Unknown Woman* in the essay “Time and Desire in the Woman’s Film”, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publish, 1987), 326. My summary.

1. portray him within a full shot or establishing shot;
2. portray him from side or back views;
3. focus on some props when he is the only person in the frame;
4. position him in the foreground out of focus;
5. position him in poor light or shadow.

Conversely, Xu repeatedly portrays Jiang's look, whether she is alone or with the man. Each time she appears in the scene, the lens first captures her eyes and then the view they see. (Figure 5-3-1 is the depiction of Jiang's looking when she is a teenage girl, young woman and mature woman respectively.) The images of the man are totally subordinate to her look. The first time we see his face is the moment Jiang is looking at him. Without her look (as in the scene I mentioned above), he is only a silhouette. He is a being that exists only in her narrative, an object created by her look. When her voice and views permeate the entire filmic space, she occupies the positions of both narrator and gazer.



Figure 5-3-1

What is more, Jiang not only acts as an agent of the gaze, she acts as the surrogate of all perception. The camera gives only her opportunities to express her feeling, emotion and thought. When the lovers are present together in the frame, the woman occupies the centre of visual interest in most situations, even those in which she is not the person moving. The picture depicting the encounter between the man and Jiang's new lover is one of the typical cases (Figure 5-3-2). The moving elements

in the frame are two men who are talking with each other, but the emphasis is on the woman who is static and silent. Sitting in the foreground and highlight area, her pose and expression controls the tone of the frame. The dialogue between the men is not important any more. What we can feel through the lens is what the woman is feeling. Furthermore, Jiang even acts as the surrogate for all the perception in the sexual scene between the lovers. In the depiction of their first sexual encounter, the man is portrayed either from the back or being sheltered from the woman's body (Figure 5-3-3). Through depriving his expression of ardour, the sexual scene becomes "an extension of Jiang's girlish emotion"³¹ rather than a depiction of sexual pleasure.



Figure 5-3-2

³¹ Yu Qunfang, "From Electra to Narcissus", 142.



Figure 5-3-3

In this sense, Xu's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a filmic narrative that is all about a woman. Nonetheless, Xu projects herself into the woman physically and spiritually. Firstly, Xu performs the female protagonist in person on the screen. Though the female role was created by Zweig, Xu does not conceal her own autographical nature through the performance. To show her intellectual beauty (that is how Chinese audience recognise her), she changes Jiang's occupation from a sales girl into a college student in her twenties, and from a prostitute into a mistress after she gives birth to a baby. In every act and move, Xu performs herself as well as Jiang. At the same time, Xu moves the location where the story happens from Vienna to Beijing, the city where she was born and grew up. Technically, it is wise for a director to film a story within a familiar cultural background. The images of old Beijing satisfy Xu's nostalgic mood. The spiritual slogan of the film "I love you, what

business is that of yours?”³² is likely to be the love motto of Xu. In her explanation in an interview, she states:

“It is no business of yours”, that is, I do not need to get anything from you. If I want you to give me something, it means that I can get the happiness only from your goodness to me, and I thereby place myself in a passive situation.³³

What she states is exactly her personal view on love as an independent woman: she says in another interview that “contemporary women only concern about the feeling of themselves in love”³⁴. I cannot help associating it with the reported love story between her and Wang Shuo³⁵ (1958-), though she has never acknowledged this.

Thus the film can be seen as a story of Xu herself, and she preserves every element beautifully with great care. According to Freud, a person may love, in narcissistic manner, the following:

1. what he is himself (actually himself);
2. what he once was;
3. what he would like to be;

³² Xu Jinglei states it as her motto of love when talking about her film *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. The sentence is from a poem written by a famous German writer and polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). German original: Wenn ich dich lieb habe, was geht's dich an?

³³ Web article, “Xu Jinglei: I Love You, What Business Is That of Yours (徐静蕾: 我爱你但与你无关)”, *Shenzhen dushibao*, May 15, 2006, accessed Aug. 18, 2009, <http://lady.people.com.cn/GB/1090/4371410.html>.

Chinese original:

“与你无关，就是说我不需要从你身上得到很多东西，如果我要得到什么东西的时候，我本身就变成被动了，就是因为你需要从别人的给予当中得到快乐。

³⁴ Web article, “Xu Jinglei: Love Is an Eternal Theme (徐静蕾: 情感主题无国界 爱情是人类永恒的话题)”, *Xinwenchenbao*, accessed Sept. 5, 2009, <http://www.xujinglei.org/letter/s03.htm>.

Chinese original:

当代女性在爱情里只关注自己的感受。

³⁵ Wang Shuo is a Chinese writer and cultural icon. Though neither of Xu nor Wang has admitted it in public, their love story has already been a well-known secret spread widely on internet, such as the following websites:

<http://society.news.mop.com/pic/xglt/2008/0321/083222791.shtml>;

http://xa.focus.cn/news/2007-04-06/299384_2.html;

<http://sh.sohu.com/20070524/n250206977.shtml>.

4. someone who was once part of himself.³⁶

Thus, the woman is always elegant. Xu omits the visual depiction of Jiang's experience of pregnancy and bearing, which could have destroyed her gorgeous appearance in front of the camera. When she is pouring out this experience, what we see on the screen is the beautiful scenery of the village in Sichuang. Xu creates an aestheticist visual world for the sake of her own narcissism.

As the director and the main performer at the same time, Xu Jinglei is the woman on both sides of the lens. When Jiang is gazing at the lens through which Xu is gazing at her, two Xu Jingleis – being in front of and behind the camera respectively – meet each other and merge. Unlike Li Yu who gazes at the female roles as the Other, Xu identifies herself with her role. Therefore, though both *Dam Street* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* are women's stories directed by women, the subjectivities embodied are very different. In contrast to Li's **her-story**, Xu is telling a story all about "I", that is, a **my-story**.

5.3.2 Docility or strategy: gazing as the Other

Comparing the narrative of Xu's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* with that of Ophuls's film, I conclude that they vary in their identification with the female protagonist. Ophuls tells a woman's story from the male standpoint, while Xu tells a my-story through her self-identification with Jiang. However, does this mean that Jiang/Xu occupies the position of the visual subject? In other words, has Xu generated a visual apparatus to deliver the look of the **self**? Through further comparison of the

³⁶ Quoted from Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 136. Summarised by Rey Chow.

visual language used by Ophuls and Xu, I classify their mode of looking, in terms of subjectivity, into “to look” and “to be looked at” respectively. Although Xu narrates as “I” who is writing the letter whilst Ophuls narrates as “you” who is reading it, the object of looking in their films is the same, that is, the woman.

Through the statement that “I love you, what business is that of yours?”, Xu canonises women’s sacrifice in love. In Xu’s universe, women love with no need, no demand, no desire, and this represents their independence as subjects in love. However, De Beauvoir has already rejected this stance in *The Second Sex* while describing the love for women as a religion³⁷. In De Beauvoir’s words:

It would be quite wrong to suppose that she escapes dependence in choosing herself as supreme end in view; on the contrary, she dooms herself to the most complete slavery. She does not stand on her independence but makes of herself an object that is imperiled by the world and by other conscious being.³⁸

Though Jiang/Xu is the narrator, she objectivises herself in what she narrates. What she loves is how her religion-like love saves her from the lack in immanence. She needs to follow him, because he is the one who had access to the infinite reality which she could never transcend by herself. Just like Jiang’s monolog in the film, “Pride? Who cares? ... Whenever I hear your summons, I will follow you even if I have already been in the tomb”³⁹. “But the paradox of idolatrous love is that in trying to save herself she denies herself utterly in the end.”⁴⁰ Therefore, as a woman who needs to fulfil her integrity by religion-like love, Jiang has no alternative but to renounce her

³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 653. In English: “Love becomes for her a religion”.

³⁸ Ibid., 651.

³⁹ Chinese Original:

自尊算什么? 只要你叫我, 我就是在坟墓里, 也会涌出一股力量, 站起来, 跟着你走。

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 660.

self in the love, that is, to become an object. Furthermore, as soon as Xu turns Jiang into her surrogate, Xu herself assumes the position of the Other.

Thus, it is a story of “I”, yet the “I” is the Other. The camera manoeuvred by Xu has demonstrated how desirous she is to be looked at by men. Just as Yu Qunfang argues that “the images of the woman occupy most shots in the film so that the screen works as a mirror of her”⁴¹, Xu creates a narcissistic visual world for herself. What does she want to see in this mirror? Without doubt, the woman’s images inside the mirror, but she also expects to observe how men gaze at these images, gaze at her. To Xu, her performance in this film is a trio – as Jiang the character, her real self and the Other simultaneously. It is neither necessary for the camera to depict the man’s desiring look, nor for the director to form an agent for the male gaze, because the woman, Jiang/Xu, has already been sublimated to become a perfect Other. As Tang Jialin argues, “what Xu expects is still a myth about how a woman is discerned by a man.”⁴² At the end of the film, a portrayal of man’s look emerges eventually. What does he see? He sees the woman finally.

As with Li Yu’s *Dam Street*, a tragedy of women as the Other is directed by a female director, though the subjectivities implied are different. Then there emerges another interesting issue: between Li and Xu, who is more powerful from a discursive approach? Seemingly, the former gets access to the discursive privilege. While speaking for the silent other-as-oppressed-victim, Li identifies herself with the intellectual, the wise and the advanced. However, with respect to the influence on the mass audience, the winner is undoubtedly the latter. Xu’s *Letter from an Unknown*

⁴¹ Yu Qunfang, “From Electra to Narcissus”, 144. 整部影片犹如女人的大镜子，女人的画面成为影片最频繁出现的镜头。

⁴² Tang Jialin, “Female Discourse in Chinese Film”, 138. 徐静蕾期待的还是一个女子为男子所发现的神话。

Woman achieved 4 million RMB box-office during the first three days after its premiere and was top one of the box-office in that week.⁴³ It then attracted much attention from various mass media, such as the internet, TV, and newspapers. By contrast, Li's *Dam Street* is not well-known to the Chinese audience, except to some theorists and critics whose work is related to contemporary Chinese cinema. That is to say, Xu's my-story is much more popular in China than Li's her-story. According to Foucault's theories that power is analysed as coming from the bottom up, Xu is more accessible to the power of discourse.

Then the question is how Xu can be empowered when she abandons the self as subject? I need to find out why she locates herself in the position of the Other. In De Beauvoir's opinion, woman feels herself as the Other from childhood. She is forced to find her reality in the immanence of her person because she is not able to fulfil herself through projects and objectives. In De Beauvoir's words, "[a]s subject she feels frustrated. ... She is occupied, but she does nothing; she does not get recognition as an individual..."⁴⁴ In Foucauldian terms, she is in a state of docility to the "subjugated knowledges"⁴⁵:

Representation is in the process of losing its power to define the mode of being common to things and to knowledge. The very being of that which is represented is now going to fall outside representation itself.⁴⁶

Power installs itself and produces real material effects; one such effect might be a particular kind of subject who will in turn act as a channel for the flow of power itself.

⁴³ Web article, "A Letter from An Unknown Woman Sold Four Million Box-Office (《一个陌生女人的来信》“卖”了400万元)", accessed Aug. 6, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2005-03-08/1317671749.html>.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 641.

⁴⁵ Foucault explains the meaning of subjugated knowledges in Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, 81-82.

⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 240.

Rey Chow's argument about sentimentalism is also relevant here. In her words:

...what used to be considered trivial and weak is accordingly reread as dazzle and strength: the seeming passivity or minoritization of those who are inmates of their environ.⁴⁷

Accordingly, it is probably a strategy for one to consider/perform herself/himself as the weak and the subaltern. In my opinion, it is docility and strategy for Xu Jinlei at the same time. On the one hand, she accepts her being as the Other unconditionally, because that is what and how she can think and speak. Whether or not she admits or realises it, she identifies herself, a woman, with the Other. That is why she constructs her filmic representation from the perspective of the Other. On the other hand, she is more than happy to be the Other. That is how she empowers herself, and the only way she can. Therefore, she displays and even performs her identity as the Other. Unlike Li empowering herself by gazing at the Other, Xu chooses to play, to perform, and to gaze as the Other.

Thus, Xu does not abandon her position in the power game while being docile to the power itself. As she says in Jiang's voice, "man, you know, always thinks that 'it is amazing for you that a man like me would fall in love with a woman like you.' Just leave him alone", what is unspoken in her lines is the power of "being the object". Via the camera shots, Xu demonstrates the gaze from the Other (Figure 5-3-4 & 5-3-5). Instead of gazing directly at the lens, Jiang/Xu is looking obliquely. It is a haughty pose which implies the fact that not only the subject possesses the gaze. The Other, as the object, the weak, the victim, the non-privileged, also has the potential to obtain the power of the gaze while being gazed at, with the power of seduction.

⁴⁷ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 16-17.



Figure 5-3-4



Figure 5-3-5

5.4 Belle Director: Legend of Talented and Beautiful Women

“Director”, in many people’s mind, is a title for men. Comparing the number of male and female directors of the post-fifth generation, the ratio of which is thirty-five to five (35:5), shows undisputably the fact that film directing is still an occupation for men, at least in China today. As the minority are squeezing into the monolithic kingdom of the other gender, female directors always face issues like, “what do I

direct?”, “how do I direct?” and “who am I?”. All those questions are related to their own gender identity – how they recognise it, how they “deal with” or “use” it, as well as how they appear as women.

Chinese female directors have long chosen to masculinise themselves. Dai Jinhua criticises the Chinese female directors from the Third to the Fifth Generation for collectively adopting a specific Hua Mulan type of social role. They tried to hide their gender/sex in their film representation by avoiding showing any feminine characteristics insofar as the themes, the narratives and visual presentation in their films. In addition, some of them even behave and appear like men in their personal lives. In Dai Jinhua’s words, “they are women who have successfully dressed up as men”.⁴⁸ She also reasons:

This bias is the idea that the mark of success for women directors lies in their ability to produce films that look the same as the ones made by men, and in the extent to which they can master the same subjects that men address. ... The more deeply they hide their own gender specificity and gender identity, the more they will be outstanding and successful.⁴⁹

However, the situation is totally different today. Instead of hiding their gender/sex markers, the female directors of the post-fifth generation unabashedly display their gender/sex as women and their feminine sexual appeal, not only within their films but also in their own appearance. Nowadays, we see the words “belle”⁵⁰ and “director” joined together constantly in different media. Moreover, the lexicon associated with the topic of “belle director” (美女导演, Meinü daoyan) are adjectives such as pretty,

⁴⁸ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 134.

⁴⁹ Dai Jinhua, “Invisible Women”, 270.

⁵⁰ The French word “belle” is specifically feminine.

sexy, and hot, all of which were supposed to have no bearing upon the women engaged in film directing before. Recently, a young female director, Yang Ziting (杨紫婷) made a spectacular debut by releasing a series of sexy photos of herself entitled “post-80’s sexy belle director” (Figure 5-4-1). As soon as she uploaded these photos on her blog, she attracted two million clicks within the first twenty-four hours. She claimed that she took these photos for the sake of promoting her new film *Beauty of Chongqing* (重庆美女, Chongqing meinü, 2009)⁵¹. Since the tone of the photos is filled with sexual suggestion, it is easily associated with the sexual-themed or at least the love romance film. However, after watching *Beauty of Chongqing*, I was astonished to find that the film is an absurdist comedy having no concern with sexual themes at all. It is really difficult for me to find any thematic coherence between her sexy photos and the film. Therefore, the emphasis in this promotion launched by these photos was not the film per se, but the director of it. And the highlight of this promotion was precisely her sexy body. Rather than a director who looks from a position of subjectivity, she is more than happy to appear half-naked with flirtatious gestures, to expose her body, to be looked at as a sexual object.

⁵¹ Web article, “Young Bella Director Marriage-Seeking Mature Man (80后重庆美女导演征婚, 拒绝潜规则只要熟男)”, accessed Sept. 5, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2009-10-15/04562730553.shtml>.



Figure 5-4-1

Yang Ziting is an exaggerated case of a “belle director”, but not the first one in contemporary China. Li Yu and Xu Jinglei also belong to the category of “belle director”: first, they are idolised as pretty women (of course, they know it); second, they have been branded as relatively “successful” directors by the audience (box-office) and film critics (domestic or overseas awards); third, they advertise their appearance as well as their film works. Instead of erasing their sexuality, they display their feminine appearance, advertise their beautiful bodies and embroider their sexual appeal when appearing in public and in the mass media. This raises new issues: why female directors today tend to appear as belle in spite of the fact that they will not be seen on the screen (at least not to be seen as the director); why do they like to display their bodies as objects for the look? In short, why do the female directors today emphasise, even advertise their femininity? Then the question returns: is it a forced docility or a strategy?

Xu Jinlei is the most distinguished case of a belle director in contemporary

China.⁵² She graduated from the Performance Department of BFA in 1997 and soon became famous for her performance in popular youth idol television dramas such as *A Sentimental Story* (一场风花雪月的事, Yichang fenghuaxueyuedeshi, dir. Zhao Baogang, 1998) and *Cherish Our Love Forever* (将爱情进行到底, Jiangaiqing jinxing daodi, dir. Zhang Yibai, 1998). She made forays into film directing with her maiden works *My Father and I* (我和爸爸, Wohe baba, 2003) in 2003. From then on, Xu successfully implemented her conversion from a belle into a gifted belle. On the one hand, she is a pop idol. The mainland Chinese media crowned her as one of the “Four Young Dan Actresses” (四小花旦, Sixiao huadan)⁵³, which is the title for the most popular female actors at present. On the other hand, she has become a cultural icon more through film directing and blog writing. Her films, though not blockbuster productions, always gain considerable box-office and positive critique. Furthermore, her Chinese language blog had the most incoming links of any blogs in any language on the internet according to Technorati in mid 2006. If we search “Xu Jinglei” on Google, we will find that her name always emerges along with expressions like beautiful and gifted woman, and belle director. The particular configuration of intellectual beauty associated with her successes in film directing represents a perfect combination of beauty and talent. She has never concealed her gender specificity but shows it. Her acting as the female protagonist in each of her films suggests that she will not abandon any chance to display her body and appeal, because the director Xu Jinglei and the belle Xu Jinglei are indivisible. Now that her name has become the byword for “belle director”, she has already been objectivised into the Other, because the title “belle director” itself designates a spectacle. Therefore, to her, to be a

⁵² Although Yang Ziting is very active in advertising herself as belle director, she has not been able to be considered as a successful director hitherto.

⁵³ The other three ones are Zhao Wei (赵薇), Zhou Xun (周迅) and Zhang Ziyi (章子怡).

spectacle is not only her screen persona, but also a part of her social identity. Within this performance as a spectacle, beauty and talent are both essential elements. That is how she performs the role of Xu Jinglei: a beautiful and talented female director who is an attractive sexual object for the male audience.

Li Yu, like Xu, has abandoned the Hua Mulan type of social role and chooses to appear as a one-hundred-percent woman. Due to her social identity as an acclaimed artistic and pioneer director, she does not show her body unveiled like Yang and Xu. However, while she struck a pose on the stage of Venice International Film Festival (2005) in red cheong-sam and model-like posture (Figure 5-4-2), she presented not only a director, but also an exotic belle to the overseas audience. Beyond physical appearance, Li presents her femininity by behaving as an insubordinate and rebellious woman. Her rebellion is firstly embodied in the marginalised themes she chooses: female homosexual, patricide, teenage pregnancy, immoral love, baby trafficking, etc. Thus, the women in her films are all trapped into uncommon paradoxes and dilemmas. Dai Jinhua argues that some female directors portray the unpleasant reality of women because of their sensitivity to subtle social “market demands”:

It is this type of film, not those which attempt to transcend or conceal the filmmaker’s gender position, that brings to prominence with greater clarity the paradox and dilemma of contemporary Chinese women’s culture.⁵⁴

However, it is not tenable in the case of Li Yu, because none of her films has obtained success at the box-office. She is not a popular director in China like Xu, but has gained reputation in the international cinema arena through awards in various international film festivals: Bangkok, Berlin, Flanders, and Venice. Rather than

⁵⁴ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 138.

tragedies, her pose of rebellion is more indispensable to her journey overseas. What is crucial is not whether the stories are miserable enough, but whether the director appears like a marginal fanatic or not. Her preference for sexual scenes is another manifestation of this argument. Due to a series of exposed depictions of sex, *Lost in Beijing* is banned outright in China cinemas. However, it seems that the sexual scenes are not so necessary to the integral narrative, because the film does not tackle sexual issues like *Lust, Caution* (色戒, *Sejie*, dir. Ang Lee, 李安, 2007). If even a famous director like Ang Lee would rather delete some revealing shots to avoid losing the Chinese market, why is it not possible for Li to compromise with the government? No, she cannot, because to be insubordinate and rebellious is the core of her self-identification, just as she describes herself as a trouble-maker⁵⁵. Through presenting such a rebellious discourse in her films, Li performs her gender role as the weak, the oppressed, the marginalised and the non-privileged, because only these personas need to empower themselves by rebellion. In this manner, she is speaking in a conventional feminine voice according to a male-centred discursive approach. Therefore, though she plays as the gazer in her film directing, she herself still adopts the social role of the Other.



Figure 5-5-2

⁵⁵ Web article. “Li Yu: I Am a Trouble Maker”.

In conclusion, both Li Yu and Xu Jinglei are constructing feminine discourses by advertising their gender identity as women and self-identifying with the Other. Some theorists consider the commercialisation and eroticisation of women's self-narration, self-exploration, and self-identification as the inescapable destiny of women in a comprehensive commercialised society.⁵⁶ To some extent, the word "belle" and "director" are paradoxical, because one connotes the feminine while the other connotes the masculine. The fact is that the conjunction of these two words benefits the Chinese female post-fifth-generation directors. That is to say, the feminine appearance of the female directors does not weaken their power of speaking but actually empowers them. This is because the function of power between masculinity and femininity is not linear, but reversible, as Baudrillard suggests:

Masculinity has always been haunted by this sudden reversibility within the feminine. Seduction and femininity are ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning and power.⁵⁷

... in matters of sexuality, the reversible form prevails over the linear form. The excluded form prevails, secretly, over the dominant form. The seductive form prevails over the productive form.⁵⁸

Hence the discursive dilemma of women is not only a cage for women but also a seductive trap for men. In Baudrillard's theories, along with the revolution of the mode of exchange from the economic one to the symbolic one⁵⁹, society today "is no

⁵⁶ Tang Jialin, "Female Discourse in Chinese Film", 136. 在迎来全面商业化以后，女性任何的自我陈述、自我探究、自我发现和自我界定都难免不被商业化，成为满足猎奇和欲望的观看对象的命运。

⁵⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Lain Hamilton Grant (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993) 2.

longer driven by power, but fascination, no longer by production, but seduction”⁶⁰. The mainstream ideology has been transformed: masculine discipline tends to be considered as negative, while feminine discipline is gaining around. In this sense, to put oneself in the position of the weak, the object and the Other can be viewed as a strategy in a power game in a symbolic society. In matter of gender identity, it is always a kind of performance. Chinese female directors no longer dress themselves up as men, because a feminine mask is more useful today. They have already noticed the power of femininity, for as Xu writes, “the world today is easier for women than for men”⁶¹; while Li says in an interview that “woman is my gender identity, yet undoubtedly brings me ascendancy to survive as a director.”⁶²

The occupation of director endows those who devote themselves to it with the right of speech. So what female directors present and how they sustain their right of speaking today demonstrate the power relation between femininity and masculinity. The directors mentioned in this chapter, Li Yu and Xu Jinglei, are both labelled as successful female directors and apotheoses of independent women. Through analysing *Dam Street* and *Letter from an Unknown woman*, I find that their films and also their own appearance represent a feminine discourse.

Firstly, they both demonstrate an obvious thematic tendency to represent women’s tragedies. In these tragedies, women collectively play their gender role in

⁶⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁶¹ Web article, “Xu Jinglei: Love Is an Eternal Theme”. 女性做事情反而比男性更容易些。

⁶² Accessed Aug. 6, 2009, <http://ent.zjol.com.cn/05ent/system/2007/12/05/009029172.shtml>. 女导演只是我的性别身份，也顺理成章是我的优势。

the mode of the other-as-oppressed-victim who is vulnerable, weak, hurt and oppressed by men within a male-centred culture. From the very beginning of feminist film studies, theorists and critics have argued that female images in films are objectivised to be the Other, even in those with female protagonists. As Sharon Smith says, “[e]ven when a woman is the central character she is generally shown as confused, or helpless and in danger, or passive, or as a purely sexual being.”⁶³ Instead of ascribing it to women’s immanent lack, I consider it as a strategy by them to empower themselves, though using different methods. What Li depicts is a “her-story”, that is to say, she tells the story from an objective and rational perspective. By gazing at the women in her films as the Other, she obtains the privilege of speaking and wins the identity of director, artist and intellectual. By contrast with Li’s “her-story”, Xu’s narrative is “my-story”. She projects herself into the female protagonist through her directing and performance. Furthermore, she self-identifies with “her”. Though she tells a story of “I”, she places the “I” on the passive side of “to be looked at”. She empowers herself with a seductive pose: to gaze as the Other. What is more, these directors not only display their femininity in films but also in their own appearance. As women, they have never negated their gender role of the Other: in terms of sex, they show their beautiful, sexy, and sometimes exotic bodies as sexual objects; in terms of social role, they belong to a vulnerable, marginalised, and oppressed group while insisting on their insubordinate and rebellious personalities.

Film, to these female directors, is an instrument which enables them to implement their desire to speak and express. Consequently, gender identification is something that can be chosen and performed. The early female directors adopted the Hua Mulan model for their social role because they could gain the discursive

⁶³ Sharon Smith, “The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestion for Future Research”, in Thornham ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, 14.

privileges only by dressing as men. By the same token, the post-fifth-generation female directors advertise their femininity because the mainstream discourse tends to be feminine today. Thus, what they represent in their films and appearance is a kind of feminine discourse. It is not a discourse belonging to a sex or a gender, but itself is a form of power.

If the power in Foucault's approach is universal, if women are doomed to be the Other, the only choice for them is to play this power game by seduction as the Other and enjoying themselves within it. Sexy belle or rebellions though she might be, it is her performance of gender. Similarly, what directors do, either female or male, is just to choose a profitable mask in masquerade.

Some critics say that "today, in a consumer society, the words 'women director', 'women's story', and 'women's film' have already become a kind of brand."⁶⁴ However, to borrow Baudrillard's words:

... advertisers should not be blamed, since the source of the persuasion and mystification was not so much their unscrupulousness as our pleasure at being deceived: it was not so much their desire to seduce, as our desire to be seduced.⁶⁵

Accordingly, we too should not blame the use of a brand, because a brand, a sign, is what people exactly want and need in a symbolic society.

⁶⁴ Tang Jialin, "Female Discourse in Chinese Film", 138. 在全面商品化的今天, '女性导演'、'女性题材'、'女性电影' 往往成了招牌。

⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 127.

Chapter 6

Make a Choice for Me, My Lady!

The Male Bewilderment Hidden in the Female Images

This chapter will analyse three films describing women's inner confusion and self-discovery. Two similar films came out of China in 1999, namely Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* and Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse*. Both films strike remarkable poses in the film arena domestically and abroad for four reasons: 1. their **cinematic-ness** – employing unstable cinematography, jump cuts, lighting and shadow designs, and an unconventional interplay of sound and images; 2. their **un-Chineseness** – abandoning the presentation of national allegory and the use of Chinese traditional visual elements; 3. their explicit or implicit references to such masterpieces as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991); 4. their respect of the personal perplexity of life and identity. The most significant similarity between the two films is the manner in which two identical female characters (each pair in the films was actually played by one actress) appear in different filmic narrative spaces, which is analogous to Kieslowski's *Veronique*. Besides, these two films also have other resemblances with *Veronique*. First, the two women with identical appearances do not have any factual links in real spaces, but one of them can feel the other one who is dead (or disappeared) and starts to be trapped within her feelings involuntarily. Second, the films' narrative focus on portraying and exploring individuals' life-perceptions and spiritual worlds more than telling stories. Therefore I describe these two films as the stories of "Chinese

Veronique”. Five years before these two films, another representative post-fifth-generation director Guan Hu produced his film debut *Dirt* which involved a similar contemplation. Though the film is obviously different from *Suzhou River* or *Lunar Eclipse* with respect to narrative mode and filmic technique, it also focuses on perplexity of a woman’s life. However, this film has not been given the same attention either overseas or domestic as the other two, in spite of the similar theme. Whether this is caused by the time difference or distribution form, such a phenomenon is a notice-worthy issue with respect to cultural studies. What is more, since this film has a female first-person narrator, unlike the other two which are narrated from a male first-person narrator (*Suzhou River*) and an omnipotent viewpoint (*Lunar Eclipse*) respectively, it is probably an isolated case in the research of the veiled pursuit of the male directors using female characters as leading roles. I hence examine this film in this chapter as an analogical case of the other two.

Because these films all address women’s inner perplexity, all these films have been praised for their consideration of women’s destiny and mental world. However, whether their representation of this “Veronique style” confusion comes from solicitude for women or from their inherent confusion and lack remains an unsolved question. Furthermore, if it is the directors’ own perplexity, what traps them into it? First, the explicit and implicit themes of the Chinese Veronique’s stories need to be explained. I will focus on discovering the central issue of the stories of the Chinese Veronique in 6.2: first delving into the significant differences between the story of the French Veronique and their Chinese counterparts, and then discussing their latent different themes. Through comparing the selected films with Kieslowski’s *Veronique*, I attempt to uncover the directors’ concealed pursuits, in the context of Chinese contemporary culture, in their films which are conversant with western art cinema.

Then, in 6.3, I will discuss the identificatory relations between the male directors and their female protagonists. Since all the films are directed by male filmmakers, I will try to illustrate the spectatorship between two sexes in these filmic narratives of heterosexual stories. I intend to detect whether or not these younger directors, who strike a more artistic personality in their filmmaking, have constructed the same stereotypical mode of male spectatorship as that of mainstream commercial cinema. In terms of spectatorship, the filmic look, which includes the visual presentation of male and female images, the handling of the camera, the structure of filmic space, and the relation between the look and being looked at, is the focus of the first half of 6.3. The second half will further probe the directors' complex self-identification in these films on the basis of the previous discussion. In a nutshell, the key point in this section is to answer the question: do these male directors gaze at the female protagonists or identify with them? Then I will explore the latent relation between the Chinese Veronique and the directors themselves in 6.4. Through analysing the essential contradictions within the Chinese Veronique's identity confusion and comparing them with the directors' filmmaking dilemmas in contemporary China, I propose to discover their choices of identity in their real career lives. Additionally, these three directors' filmmaking experiences are extraordinarily different from each other, despite making these thematically similar films. Both Wang Quan'an and Lou Ye continue their filmmaking smoothly and sustainably afterwards. By contrast, Guan Hu's career life does not seem to be so prosperous. After releasing *Dirt*, he nearly disappeared from the film industry for eight years until he made *Eyes of a Beauty* (西施眼, Xishiyan) in 2002. Therefore, what triggers their different career "destinies" becomes an intriguing question. Is it because of the different styles of their cinematic presentations, or, the consequence of the directors' different choices of identity? I am

going to attempt to answer these questions in 6.4.

6.1 Synopsis of the Selected Films

Suzhou River is a film noir by Lou Ye. Lou Ye studied film directing at Beijing Film Studio and graduated in 1989, and then started to make films in 1993. To date he has directed six feature films in total, namely, *Weekend Lover* (周末情人, Zhoumo qingren, 1993), *Don't Be Young* (危情少女, Weiqing shaonü, 1995), *Suzhou River*, *Purple Butterfly* (紫蝴蝶, Zihudie, 2003), *Summer Palace* (颐和园, Yiheyuan, 2006), and *Spring Fever* (春风沉醉的晚上, Chunfengchenzuide wanshang, 2009). Partly due to his preference for structuring film narratives led by women, three of his works are selected in this thesis. I will analyse the other two, *Purple Butterfly* and *Summer Palace*, in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 respectively. After directing two films in a state-run film studio, Lou started to make films outside the censorship.¹ Without any official production funding from China, *Suzhou River* was co-produced by the German Essential Films and Dream Factory. The film has been well-received in the western art house cinema arena and has won five awards in various international film festivals, that is, Fantasporto Oporto Film Festival (2002, Critics Award), Paris Film Festival (2000, Best Actress & Grand Prix), Viennale Film Festival (2000, Fipresci Prize), and Rotterdam International Film Festival (2000, Tiger Award). However, *Suzhou River* was not screened or released in China, as Lou was banned from filmmaking within the national system for two years after screening it at overseas film

¹ I will discuss the issue addressing Chinese film production inside or outside censorship system in 7.2.

festivals without the permission of SARFT.

Suzhou River is a tragic love story set in contemporary Shanghai. The Suzhou River that flows across Shanghai is a reservoir of filth, chaos and poverty, but also a meeting place for memories and secrets. An anonymous videographer opens the film with a monologue about the eponymous Suzhou River and love. He starts by telling us about a romance between himself and Meimei (played by Zhou Xun, 周迅), a performer at “Happy Tavern”, a dive bar in Shanghai. Meimei tells him the story of Mardar (Jia Hongsheng, 贾宏声), a motorcycle courier, and Mudan (Zhou Xun), a rich businessman’s daughter. Mardar is hired to ferry Mudan around town whenever Mudan’s father brings home one of his mistresses. Complex gang machinations force Mardar to kidnap Mudan for ransom, after they have fallen in love. After noticing the truth, Mudan escapes and jumps into the Suzhou River. Years later, Mardar returns to Shanghai to search for Mudan after being released from prison. He finds Meimei instead, and becomes convinced that Mudan and Meimei is the same person. Mardar finally thinks that he finds Mudan in a dairy shop. The film ends with the ambiguous deaths of both Mardar and Mudan. After seeing Mardar and Mudan’s bodies, Meimei leaves the videographer with the following question: “If I leave you someday, would you look for me, like Mardar looking for Mudan?”

Lunar Eclipse was the directorial debut of Wang Quan’an in 1999. Besides this film, Wang Quan’an has completed four feature films altogether to date – *The Story of Ermei* (惊蛰, Jingzhe, 2004), *Tuya’s Marriage* (图雅的婚事, Tuyade Hunshi, 2007), *Apart Together* (团圆, Tuanyuan, 2010) and *White Deer Plain* (白鹿原, Bailuyuan, 2012). *Lunar Eclipse* was produced by Beijing Film Studio. Unlike many other post-fifth-generation films made in the 1990s which are widely shown in the west but little

known inside China, this film has not only harvested awards abroad by winning Fipresci Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival, but has also gained applause from Chinese film critics and theorists.² With its theme of dual female identities, the film is often referenced in conjunction with *Suzhou River*.

Lunar Eclipse is an urban drama following the wife of a newlywed couple, Yanan (played by Yu Nan, 余男). The couple has a chance encounter with an enigmatic minivan driver and amateur photographer with a passion for photography, Hu Xiaobing (Wu Chao, 吴超), who claims to have once been in love with a woman who looked just like Yanan. Impelled by curiosity, Yanan cannot help seeking the story of the girl, Jianiang (Yu Nan). From Hu's narration, Yanan gets to know that Jianiang was a girl looking forward to becoming an actress and struggling in the entertainment industry. One day, Jianiang was raped and then died in a traffic accident when she tried to flee. While Yanan still suspects the veracity of the story, she suddenly sees a photo of a girl who bears an uncanny resemblance to herself. Being shocked by the photo, Yanan goes to her husband's office, but accidentally discovers the ambiguous relationship between him and his secretary. In desperation, Yanan sees such a scene in illusion: Jianiang is crushed by a truck, then stands up and comes towards her.

Dirt is Guan Hu's first feature film when he became the youngest director at Beijing Film Studio after graduating from BFA in 1991 at the age of twenty-three. Though it was his debut, *Dirt* is the most notable of all his works. Similar to other 1990s' post-fifth-generation films, *Dirt* was filmed on a shoestring budget and was

² Several Chinese famous film critics, theorists and filmmakers, such as Huang Shixian, Hao Jian, Dai Jinhua and Zhang Xianmin, give high praise to *Lunar Eclipse*. Huang Shixian, "Lunar Eclipse: An Avant-garde Film Aroused Discussion about Chinese Cinema", 29-37.

funded primarily by the lead actress, Kong Lin (孔琳). However, unlike his colleagues such as Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai who refused to negotiate with the censorship but converted to an independent production mode in the early 1990s³, Guan paid nearly 2000 USD for state studio affiliation (Inner-Mongolia Film Studio), thus allowing the film to be distributed in China and screened abroad with an approval of SARFT.

The story takes place at the end of the 1980s when Ye Tong (played by Kong Lin), a young woman studying medicine, returns from Guangzhou to her hometown Beijing for her internship at a medical school. Having been expelled from Beijing for political reasons, she has always missed Beijing, the old Hutongs⁴ and her childhood friends, who are now all grown-ups struggling for their own lives. Zheng Weidong (played by Zhang Xiaotong, 张小童) has become a local policeman. Chi Xuan devotes himself to making money. Zheng Weiping (Wei Dong's elder sister) is pregnant but divorced. Lei Bing has been arrested by Weidong and escapes from jail. At a party, Ye Tong meets a rock 'n roll musician, Peng Wei (played by Geng Le, 耿乐). Attracted by the passionate music, she spends most of her time with his band and falls in love with him. However, Peng Wei and Zheng Weidong, who were classmates in high school, loathe each other. It is hard for the band to find a place for rehearsal. When they finally find a place, it is accidentally set on fire and burned down during a big row among the musicians. Lei Bing injures Zheng Weidong and kills himself by accident when running away. Disappointed to find out that Peng Wei has been living with another girl, Ye Tong responds to Zheng Weidong's love for her. She helps him to run away from the hospital where he is being treated for his injury and sleeps with

³ I will discuss the issue about Chinese independent filmmaking in Chapter 7.

⁴ Hutongs are a type of narrow streets or alleys, most associated with the traditional building Siheyuan in Beijing, China.

him in her flat in an old Hutong. At the end of the film, Zheng Weiping gives birth to a baby. Feeling lost both in searching for love and in searching for the Beijing of her memory, Ye Tong decides to leave the medical school and Beijing as well. Before her departure, she sings a rock 'roll song in a concert celebrating her former secondary school's anniversary.

6.2 Theme of the Chinese Veronique: Personal Passion and the City

Weronika and Veronique⁵ (played by Irene Jacob), two young women sharing the same name and appearance, are for all intents and purposes one and the same, and yet irreducibly different. Weronika, a young Polish woman, is by chance offered an audition and ultimately a solo part in a concert. Suffering from heart problems, she dies on the stage when singing some extraordinary high notes. At the moment when Weronika is staring at the death of herself (Kieslowski uses her point of view to portray the mourners tossing earth onto her casket), Veronique, a French music teacher, is suddenly immersed in an uncanny sense of grief and solitude. Through knitting an invisible thread between the double Veroniques, Kieslowski once again illuminates an eternal theme of artistic creation: the complexity of "I".

From this aspect, both Lou and Wang Quan'an pay their homage to the master's spirit in *Veronique* through their own filmmaking, whether they admit it or not. It is embodied not only in the two identical-looking women, but also in their inexpressible connection. The links between the two Veroniques in Kieslowski's filmic narrative are elusory. Though they share the same name, the same appearance and the same life

⁵ Weronika is the Polish spelling of Veronique.

passion – singing, they do not have any intersection in real life. However, they can “feel” each other’s existence. In the Warsaw part of the film, Weronika says: “Sometimes I feel I’m not alone.” Then in the Paris part, when Weronika is dead, Veronique says: “Not long ago, I had a strange sensation. I felt that I was alone, all of a sudden.” After Weronika dies by a heart-attack during the concert, Veronique decides to quit an opera performance as soloist, as if being impacted by an inauspicious presentiment. From then on, Weronika’s final aria resonates intermittently in Veronique’s ears and heart.

Similarly, Lou and Wang Quan’an have also included several details to drop a hint to the audience of the implicit connection between the two women in their films. In *Suzhou River*, the connection between Meimei and Mudan is built through the references to mermaids and peony tattoos⁶. A mermaid doll is the first gift Mudan receives from her lover Madar. Before she jumps into the Suzhou River, feeling betrayed by Madar, she tells him that she would come back as a mermaid. Several years later, the mermaid does come back, swimming with a red tail in the tank in Happy Tavern bar, played in costume by Meimei. Later, when Madar tells Meimei that Mudan often wears a press-on peony tattoo on her left leg, Meimei slowly exposes her left leg where a peony tattoo can be seen. Miraculously, Meimei exists just like a reincarnation of Mudan.

In *Lunar Eclipse*, the director suggests an inexpressible connection between Yanan and Jianiang on several occasions. Yanan suffers from a congenital heart disease, and Jianiang is likely to inherit lunacy from her mother’s family. Before Jianiang’s death, her right eye is hurt violently by a man, and, coincidentally, Yanan

⁶ Mudan is the Chinese pronunciation for peony, so that the girl’s name actually means peony.

always feels an uncomfortable sensation in her right eye, without reason. What is more, the film begins with a traffic accident which almost kills Yanan and ends with another traffic accident which really kills Jianiang. Just as the key statement on *Lunar Eclipse*'s poster says: "Two Girls, one story; or, one girl, two stories", the lives of Yanan and Jianiang are linked mysteriously. Eventually, all these women witness the existence of the other "I", just as Veronique finally notices Weronika's photo in her album that she shot fortuitously in Warsaw: in Rongrong Photoshop, Yanan encounters an enlarged picture of Jianiang where Jianiang seems to stare at her; beside Suzhou River, Meimei sees Mudan's dead body lying on the riverside. Thereby, to a great extent, *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* both tell the "Veronique style"⁷ stories: the stories about "the double life" of a woman.

However, Meimei and Yanan, the Chinese Veronique, are engaged in a different thematic double life from Kieslowski's Veronique. To argue this point of view, I need to find out what Kieslowski explores in his Veronique. He once defined the film's subject matter to interviewer Danusia Stok: "The realm of superstitions, fortune-telling, presentiments, intuition, dreams, all this is the inner life of a human being, and all this is the hardest thing to film."⁸ In a nutshell, what he probes in *Veronique* is whether the spiritual being of humans (the soul, in other words) exists or not, and the contradictory relations between the soul and the body. Liu Xiaofeng's critique of this film in his book *Unbearable Body* neatly fits into the argument here. "Weronika and Veronique", he annotates, "is one woman, nevertheless, each is the body and shadow of each other."⁹ The shadow here, actually, means the soul. The body enacts the desire

⁷ In order to avoid repeated explanation, I will use the phrase "Veronique style" (with quotation marks) to describe the artistic presentation of women's double life in the rest of this chapter.

⁸ Jonathan Romney, "Through the Looking Glass", in the introduction book published with DVD of *The Double Life of Veronique* (Us & Canada: The Criterion Collection, 1991), 11.

⁹ Liu Xiaofeng, *Unbearable Body*, 112. 这两位同名、同姓、同身体的薇娥丽卡其实是一个人，只

of being. But it is the shadow/soul that decides one's value. However, the shadow is merely the shadow. Without bodily desire, value will always be trapped in chaos. Therefore, “**individual passion** is generated as a thread connecting one's body and shadow.”¹⁰ Veronique's passion is singing. When she is indulging herself in singing, she feels that her body and shadow are dancing together. However, this thread is often delicate. In Veronique/Weronika's case, her heart is not strong enough for singing. Weronika keeps chasing her passion till her body collapses. Veronique, on the other hand, quits a concert because her body's “desire of being” feels the sorrow of death. However, hereafter, Veronique immerses herself in the grief of loneliness. It is her shadow/soul's groan. Her shadow/soul feels lonely when the body stops singing. Kieslowski links the two scenes together: whilst Weronika is staring at the earth falling on her casket, Veronique is making love with her boyfriend. “The sense of death and that of sex, the instinctive opponents of life perception, are confronting each other.”¹¹ Therefore, what Kieslowski probes in Veronique's double life is an everlasting dilemma for a human being's inner life: the contradiction between the soul's preference and the body's desire of being.

Then, what is the theme of the Chinese Veronique in *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*? Do Meimei and Mudan, Yanan and Jianiang exist as the body and shadow to each other? Are Meimei and Yanan also trapped in the perplexing sensation of the body and the soul? The answer hidden in these quasi-“Veronique style” stories is **no**. The double life of Meimei and Yanan, different from that of Veronique which presents the contradictory relation between one's body and shadow/soul, illuminates the

不过一个是另一个的身体或影子。

¹⁰ Ibid., 114. 个体热情因此像是一个人自己的身体和影子织成的一根细线。

¹¹ Ibid., 119. 下葬与做爱连接的是生与死、性感与死感的迎面相撞，两个生存的本然对手的迎面相逢。

dilemma of one's individual desire in a modern society. The French Veronique's double life is utterly immanent, whereas, those of the Chinese Veroniques are generated by the outer world, because they are not disturbed by their shadow/souls, but trapped in another everlasting predicament of human being: the confusion of identity constructed and imposed by society.

When the French Veronique feels her shadow/soul's unsatisfied desire, she falls into a kind of inexplicable sorrow and loneliness. When the Chinese Veroniques are told of the existence of another "I", they notice what they lack in their current identities. Just as Sun Shaoyi indicates: "the resemblance between 'Yanan and Jianiang' and 'Meimei and Mudan' is an indication that both Yanan and Meimei are aware of the void in their lives and their desire to fill the void."¹²

Meimei, an entertainer who has made a living in nightclubs for several years, treats love with doubts and cynicism. Nonetheless, in her deeper heart, she aspires for the true love that will last till death. Maybe she has never realised her aspiration until Madar tells her the story of him and Mudan. The first time Madar calls Meimei Mudan and asks her if she can recognise him, she takes him as a typical playboy and answers gruffly: "Drop it! I have seen too many men like you."¹³ However, Madar's repetition of the same story again and again has triggered her obsession for it. Knowing that Mudan wears a press-on peony tattoo on her left leg, Meimei secretly presses the same tattoo on the same position. On the one hand, she refuses to believe such a fairy-tale romance. But, at the same time, she cannot help projecting herself into Mudan. Once, when Madar mentions the peony tattoo again, she retorts that such

¹² Sun Shaoyi, "In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers of China" in Kong & Lent ed., *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: a Generational*, 192.

¹³ 像你这样的我见多了，少来!

press-on tattoos can be found everywhere. Then, several seconds later, she pulls up the dress, showing the tattoo on her left leg to Madar, and asks: “Am I Mudan, the girl you are looking for?” Knowing Mudan (through Madar’s narrative), Meimei is aware of the lack in her life. What she lacks, as Sun Shaoyi indicates, is “the true love that becomes increasingly rare to find in the fin-de-siecle city of Shanghai.”¹⁴ This lack draws her closer to Madar, a man who will never stop looking for his lover Mudan. She does not love Madar, but simply wants to be Mudan, wants to be loved as Mudan.

Yanan is a young woman standing at an intersection of her life. After a traffic accident, she decides to quit her career as a musical performer and marry a peasant-turned-businessman. The marriage enables her to live comfortably in the city, but the material gain cannot fill up her spiritual void. She soon realises that her life as a full-time housewife lacks passion, which her insensitive husband cannot understand at all. At that moment, Hu Xiaobing bursts into her life and tells her the story of Jianiang.

Not only looking identical to Yanan, Jianiang also has a personal passion like Yanan. However, unlike Yanan who abandons her personal passion but chooses an easy marriage life, Jianiang is obsessed with her dream of being a film actress. She persists in chasing this dream unbridled as she says: “I can do anything for it”. To a large extent, Jianiang is doing what Yanan desires to do but dare not. From this aspect, Jianiang is Yanan’s missing complement that the less courageous Yanan can never attain. At the inception of the story, she has already realised her weakness from the outbreak of her heart disease. At the end, she witnesses Jianiang being killed by a traffic accident and decides to return to her unhappy marriage. Therefore, what puzzles Yanan is what kind of life she should choose: a peaceful one with financial

¹⁴ Sun Shaoyi, “In Search of the Erased Half”, 193.

security but lack of passion, or a passionate one but full of risks – in other words, what kind of person she should be. She chooses to be Yanan but desires to be Jianiang. Hence, she becomes intrigued by Jianiang and longs for an eventual union with her.

A thorough analysis of the mental and psychological relations between the two women with identical appearance in *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* respectively, brings out the central contradiction discussed in the films to the surface. Both Meimei and Yanan, the Chinese Veroniques, are bewildered in their own identification, that is, what kind of social identity they would/should adopt. In this aspect, *Dirt* tells a similar story to *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*, though the director does not set up the metaphor of confusing identity with two identical female images. Ye Tong is a girl growing up in a very musical family. Her father, who had been a professional musician before being persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, forbids her from studying music. At the time, music seems to be an unpractical career in the early 1990s when the market economy develops fast in China. Obeying her parents' suggestion and the social reality, Ye Tong abandons her music dream and becomes a student in medicine. However, the passion for music convulses her once again when she meets Peng Wei and his rock 'n roll band. Guan Hu, the director does not express identity confusion in Ye with the emergence of another same-looking woman, but places it on two men who are both her potential boyfriends. On the surface, she is wandering between Weidong and Peng Wei, a policemen and a rock 'n roll singer. Actually, she is dithering about her life choice: to be with Weidong, continue her boring medicine study, which means a stable but boring life; or, to be with Peng Wei, release her personal passion, which means a free, exciting but risky life. To a great extent, the character of Ye Tong carries similar life-doubts as those of Meimei and Yanan. She too is a Chinese Veronique. Therefore, whether these directors construct

the allegory of “the double life” or not, the women in their films are involved in the same perplexity of identity and life. If the central doubt of French *Veronique* is “what am I?” then that of Chinese *Veronique* is “who am I?” or, rather, “who should I become?”

Moreover, besides the women, “the city” is a subtle protagonist in Chinese *Veronique*’s stories. In *Veronique*, either Warsaw or Paris is only a background of the film. Kieslowski does not have any intention to portray the distinctive characteristics of these two cities in terms of culture, economy or politics. What he needs is only the streets, the building and the natural landscape. In other words, Kieslowski does not tell a particular story in Warsaw or Paris, but rather the story of *Veronique*, and only for her. Moreover, no element in the film embodies any special time characteristics. To a great extent, French *Veronique*’s story happens in a relative vacuum – anywhere, anytime. It is a filmic narrative all about her and her inner world. In contrast, Chinese *Veronique*’s stories happen at particular places and times, that is, a modern Chinese metropolis in the 1990s when China encountered swift change in the cultural, economical and political spheres. Sun Shaoyi claims that Lou and Wang Quan’an show less “Chineseness” but more “international” quality in their filmmaking when they “represent a new trend in Chinese cinema that turns away from the so-called national allegory to a more ‘de-localised’ concern for themes that are traditionally ‘reserved’ for artists in the West.”¹⁵ Admittedly, most of the post-fifth generation (including Lou and Wang), diverging from the Fifth Generation, abandon the extensive use of traditional Chinese visual elements, such as old building, traditional decoration, ancient costumes, conventional ceremonies, and so on. Some western critics have actually asked Lou such a question as “How can China make a film

¹⁵ Sun Shaoyi, “In Search of the Erased Half”, 195.

(*Suzhou River*) like this?”¹⁶ However, in my opinion, these films are un-Chinese to a large extent, but their thematic demonstration is by no means de-localised, because the films focus on the city as much as on the exploration of the women’s identification perplexity.

Suzhou River begins with a three-minutes-long sequence that consists of scores of shots portraying the ruined factory, the shabby boathouse, the ragged locality, the absentminded passersby, and the polluted Suzhou River. The landscape of Shanghai is introduced with its mother river¹⁷, not through an establishing shot, but fragmented and rearranged with cinematography including hand-held camera, unconventional camera angles, fast pan-shots and jump cuts. Employing these cinematic techniques, Lou constructs the images of Shanghai subjectively from his own perspective. The city re-presented by him appears to consist of a pile of contradistinctively juxtaposed images: the dazzling and tempting clubs vis-à-vis the ruined factory, the imported motorcycle running through the old and filthy Longtang¹⁸, the fashionable city girl living in the shabby boathouse, and so forth. However, undoubtedly, this Shanghai in Lou’s cinematic representation is very Shanghainese. Those interlaced pictures, which juxtapose extravagance and decadence, exactly compose a panorama of Shanghai in the 1990s that embodies a kind of chaotic aesthetics generated by a complicated and inconsistent cultural context. Since Deng Xiaoping performed his Southern Tour¹⁹ and

¹⁶ Lou Ye mentioned that *Suzhou River* was doubted for its un-Chineseness by some western critics in the international film festival in an interview with Sun Shaoyi conducted on November 29, 2002, Shanghai. Quoted from Sun Shaoyi, “In Search of the Erased Half”, 196.

¹⁷ Suzhou River is claimed as Shanghai’s mother river, because it flows across the city centre of Shanghai.

¹⁸ Longtang is a special and old architecture form in Shanghai that emerged in the early 1900s when Shanghai was divided into several Concessions by several western countries. Specifically, it means the straight alleys connecting and arranging the resident buildings, pronounced Longtang in Shanghai dialect.

¹⁹ In January 1992, Deng Xiaoping made an inspection tour to south China where he delivered a series of speeches aimed to clarify the muddled idea about whether the establishment of special economic zones was of “capitalism” or socialism” in nature, which was significant to the development of market

reinvigorated the reform process in 1992, China, especially the big cities, has sped up opening and marketing development. Though seeming undesigned, the characteristics of this particularly transitional time are displayed in the film – the transformation of State-owned enterprises (the ruined factory), the prevalence of western production (clubs and the western alcohol such as vodka), the emergence of self-employed people (the free-lance photographer), the increase of private business (Happy Tavern bar and Mudan's father's smuggling business), and so on. Meanwhile, a chaotic and restless atmosphere also permeates the Beijing in Wang Quan'an and Guan Hu's filmic descriptions, presenting evident features of a city in rapid evolution. On the one hand, many people's choices be it Yanan's decision of quitting from her "iron bowl" to become a full-time housewife, or her husband's transfiguration from a peasant to a wealthy businessman, or Hu Xiaobing and Niuniu's self-employed careers, or Jianiang's job as a dancer in a disco, are outcomes of the opening and reform policy in the 1990s. On the other hand, the portrayals of the old courtyard and the conservative people living inside, which are so different from the scenes mentioned above, also represent the reality of this city. Similarly, Beijing in *Dirt* is filled with contradictory elements. This is seen in what Ye Tong feels, when she comes back to Beijing to see her homeland and her old friends again, but eventually finds that everything is different from her childhood. In her words, "Beijing has come up with some pretty interesting stuff." Thus, the portrayals of Shanghai and Beijing in the 1990s, the local and time background of these selected films, are not as void as those of Warsaw and Paris in *Veronique*. Although the films do not display the **Chineseness** in a conventional definition, they actually present the humanistic details of a particular place and time.

What is more, the depiction of heterosexual relations in these films is different from that in Kieslowski's filmic narrative. Only two kinds of male images emerge in *Veronique*, namely, the father and the lover. Nevertheless, Kieslowski's focus is on the natural attributes within these heterosexual relations, that is, the paternal love from the father and the sexual appeal in lovers. By comparison, the male images in *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse* and *Dirt* function more or less as signifiers in a sociological sphere. Whether the depiction of the economic affiliation between Yanan and her husband, or that of Jianiang being raped by a wealthy man, or that of Meimei's occupation as a sexual spectacle for men, each implies the power relationship between two sexes in a patriarchal society. From this perspective, the portrayals of heterosexual relations in these films contain more sociological references than natural ones.

The thematic difference between Kieslowski's *Veronique* and the Chinese *Veroniques* underneath the explicit resemblance can be uncovered through a comparison between *Veronique* and the three selected films. In contrast with Kieslowski's *Veronique* which delves into the contradiction between one's body and soul, the films of Chinese *Veronique* discuss the disunity and compromise between personal passion and society. The missing half of French *Veronique* is immanent, but those of Chinese *Veroniques* are produced by the outer world. Therefore, Kieslowski tells a story of an individual as a human being; comparatively, these post-fifth-generation filmmakers tell the stories of the individuals in a particular social context. I am not entirely denying the concern and exploration of individuals and their inner psychology. However, my point here is that the individuals' stories in these films represent some social and collective attributes. In a nutshell, the stories of Chinese *Veronique* are not only individuals' stories, but, rather, sociological stories. "I" and

another “I”, to Chinese Veronique, is not the issue all about herself.

6.3 Double Tasks of the Chinese Veronique: Avatar and Object

Coincidentally, the young Chinese male filmmakers have shown their earnest attention to women’s dilemmas living in society, which is a significant feminist issue. However, shall we therefore celebrate their choice of a female theme as a feminist achievement? I still have some queries about their preference for a “Veronique style” story: Is the portrayal of women’s identity confusion their ultimate pursuit in their filmmaking? Why do they choose women as the confused subject in their filmmaking? Is it simply from their consideration of women’s life and mental world? In order to answer the above questions, we must first examine the cognition and identification relations between the female protagonists and the directors themselves. *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* are claimed to be conversant with contemporary trends of art cinema not only for their themes but also for their cinematic-ness. Employing cinematography and montage techniques such as flashy graphics, unconventional camera angles, jump cuts, and incoherent narratives, the directors portray a dazzling visual world and construct a convoluted filmic narrative. Hence, the identifying relations in these films are complicated and multiple.

On the one hand, it seems that the directors surrogate themselves into the female protagonist, at the very least, partially. First, as discussed in 6.2, the films focus on women’s psychological worlds and identification dilemmas. Whether these male directors have eventually achieved their goals or not, they do try to present the inner issues of (or, through) women: the bewilderment, the mental losts, and the inner lack

engendered by their social status quo. What is more, the women in these films are positive in terms of behaviour because they all have a self-conscious desire, that is, to look for the erased half of their lives. For that matter, the Chinese Veroniques are much more active than the French one, who is passive, because what she is struggling with is an insoluble immanent issue. From this perspective, French Veronique has no choice. By contrast, the Chinese Veroniques are dealing with practical and explicit problems, as argued in 6.2. Furthermore, they all actively embark on a journey of self-discovery as soon as they notice the lacks of their lives and cognise the existence of another “I”.

Lou Ye himself has compared his *Suzhou River* with Kieslowski’s *Veronique* and drawn the conclusion that “Kieslowski’s film [*Veronique*] is focusing on the metaphysical life experience, in contrast, my film case [*Suzhou River*] is permeated with the motif of ‘search’.”²⁰ The director is probably the person who understands his works the best, and besides, the representation of “search” is not subtle in the film at all.

“If I leave you someday, would you look for me like Madar?

Yes.

Would you look for me forever?

Yes.

Your whole life?

Yes.

²⁰ Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou ed., *My Camera doesn't Lie: a Documentary of the Avant-garde Filmmakers Born Between 1961 and 1970* (Beijing: Chinese Friendship Press, 2002), 257. 基斯洛夫斯基的影片更多的是形而上的生命体验，而我的影片还是贯穿在寻找之中。

You are lying!”²¹

As shown in the above dialogue between Meimei and the photographer that begins and ends the film, the whole film, including its plots, its filmic narrative mode and the manipulation of the camera lens, concentrates on “looking for”. Nevertheless, it is easy to realise that the director is not interested in the act of “looking for” through the male character’s absentminded sound. Meimei, the one who desires to be looked for, is the one who functions as the subject of the behaviour of searching for. At the beginning, Meimei appears to be a typical self-centred city girl who is self-indulgent and a little narcissistic. She feels the void in her life when she learns of the love romance between Mudan and Marda. Then she plays the game of disappearance with her lover again and again, because she wants to find her missing complement through being looked for by her lover, as if Mudan is looked for by Marda. She presses the peony tattoo on her left leg as Mudan did. Through the mimicry of Mudan, she looks for another life and another identity.

Yanan is seeking too. When she tells the friend about her marriage, she looks comfortable with herself. However, in fact, she feels an unintelligible loss in her deep heart even though she enters an ideal marriage (at least, in terms of financial condition, her marriage can be regarded as ideal). When Hu Xiaobing gives her the knife which was Jianiang’s amulet, she grasps the knife as if grasping what she has lost. The director uses a series of close-ups to emphasise this action (Figure 6-3-1), because it is the start of her journey of self-discovery. When her lacklustre bourgeois life encounters Jianiang’s reckless enthusiasm, her desire for a free, passionate and colourful life is aroused. She, then meets with Hu Xiaobing again and again, to chase

²¹ The lines of the film. “如果有一天我走了，你会像马达一样来找我吗？” “会啊。” “会一直找吗？” “会啊。” “会一直找到死吗？” “会啊。” “你撒谎！”

Jianiang's story, to follow on in her steps.



Figure 6-3-1

Ye Tong is on a similar journey, nevertheless, a more positive one. She has already realised her lack at the beginning and thereby returns to her hometown Beijing to look for her childhood memory, or, rather, her true self. She soon devotes herself to Peng Wei's rock 'n roll band. She helps Weidong flee from the hospital and then makes love with him in her old apartment. Finally she quits her study in medicine. Though her journey is filled with confliction and bewilderment, her aim is insistent: to discover herself and search for the erased half of her life.

Comparatively, the male characters are not as active as their female counterparts. Some of them just accept their current life and identity without any doubt, such as Yanan's husband (*Lunar Eclipse*), Weidong (*Dirt*) and the videographer (*Suzhou River*). Some others, such as Hu Xiaobing and Peng Wei, though revealing their own anxiety, have never bothered to look for what they lack. In terms of storyline, the directors endow the women with more depth than the men characters. Therefore, the male directors have established a substitution relationship between the women they created and themselves, at the very least, in the mental and psychological spheres.

However, when the women show more activity than men in terms of behaviours in these stories, do they occupy the active position in the filmic **look** accordingly? In

spite of substituting themselves into the female characters to some extent, does it mean that the male directors simultaneously share the subjectivity of filmic **look** and narrative with women? The visual presentation and narrative of the female images in *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* uncover the fact that women in the stories are designed by men, including the male characters and the male directors. Both the mise-en-scene and the narrative of the films have actually demonstrated how the female images are gazed at, imagined and constructed by the male-centred ideology for the male voyeuristic fantasies through the film apparatus.

First, the cinematic look in *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* actually provides the “male gaze”, in Mulvey’s terms, which engenders a model of women’s to-be-looked-at-ness and men’s voyeurism and fetishism. The camera plays a key role in *Suzhou River* as Damion Searls describes that “[t]he movie’s camera sometimes is the narrator’s camera and sometimes isn’t; it is the narrator’s camera insofar as his eye is his camera; we both are and are not the narrator himself, as Meimei both is and is not Mudan.”²² The male narrator, who is a quasi-professional videographer, never shows his face in front of the camera, but only displays what he sees through the camera lens. This absence of his image posits him as a thorough **looker** and provides him the perfect privilege of being a gazer. When he is present, all the shots are from his point of view. Thus, almost throughout the film, Meimei is displayed in his looks, that is, the frames composed by his camera lens. The visual portrayals of Meimei’s image have two characteristics. First, most of them are close-up shots when she is in the narrator’s camera lens. When she first appears in his sight as a mermaid in a tank, the (narrator’s) camera – his eyes – does not depict her in full view, but stares at her body partially and concentratively (Figure 6-3-2). After they become lovers, she is still

²² Damion Searls, “*Suzhou River*”, *Film Quarterly* 55, 2 (winter 2001): 56.

displayed: strolling, chewing gum, and moaning in tight close-ups (Figure 6-3-3). The videographer admits his desire of looking at Meimei by himself: “I know nothing about Meimei, but just like looking at her and filming her.”²³ Sean Metzger also indicates that “the narrator’s point of view shots direct the spectator’s gaze in erotic objection of Meimei”.²⁴ Nevertheless, when the camera is not the narrator’s, it too adopts close-ups to lead the audiences’ look at her body. In the scene which depicts Meimei pressing a tattoo on her leg, the camera first focuses on her face then moves down slowly to her thigh when she gently raises the skirt and exposes her leg in front of the lens (Figure 6-3-4). Secondly, the camera tends to capture her image from quasi-peep angles by placing her into frames consisting of the edges of door or furniture. The director depicts Meimei changing clothes twice in the film, something that seems unnecessary in telling the story. In both scenes, Meimei is placed in a frame-like composition that highlights her at the gazed-at centre. Furthermore, the director places some “barriers” between Meimei and the camera, coveing her intermittently and partially when she moves (Figure 6-3-5 & 6-3-6). These visual portrayals of Meimei simulate the quasi-peep look on the female body. In short, the look of *Suzhou River* constructs a spectatorship between the male gazing subject and the female eroticised object.



²³ Lines in *Suzhou River*. 我对美美一无所知，只是喜欢这样看她拍她。

²⁴ Metzger, “The Little (Chinese) Mermaid, or Importing ‘Western’ Femininity in Lou Ye’s *Suzhou he* (*Suzhou River*)”, 147.

Figure 6-3-2



Figure 6-3-3

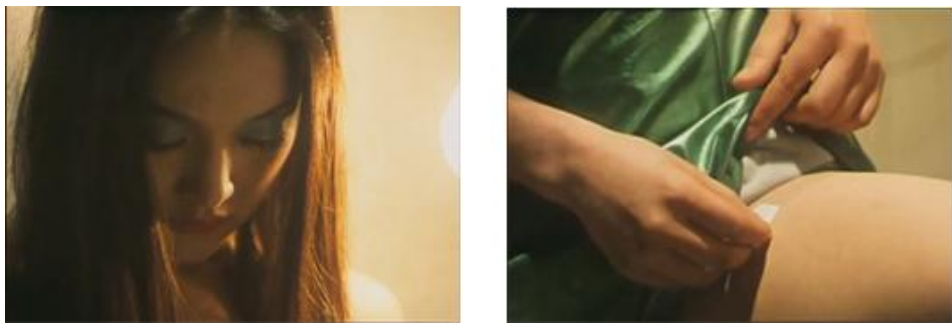


Figure 6-3-4



Figure 6-3-5



Figure 6-3-6

Coincidentally, Yanan is also “discovered” by a camera of a man (Hu Xiaobing) (Figure 6-3-7), and her spiritual journey of double life starts from the moment of being discovered. Meanwhile, Yanan herself also has a video camera from the beginning of the film. However, her camera only wanders aimlessly on the street among the people. She has not discerned her “other self” through her own camera, but through a male character’s. Therefore, the women in both films are placed in a passive position in terms of the **look** of the films: being looked at, being discovered and being gazed at, which fits Mulvey’s argument that “[g]oing far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.”²⁵

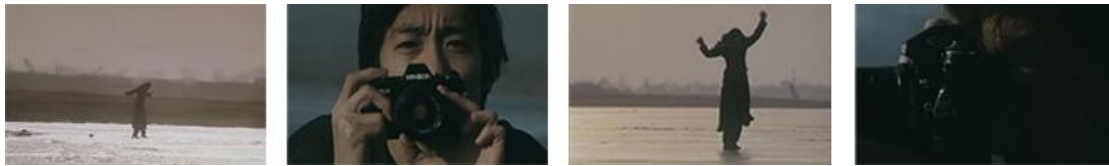


Figure 6-3-7

Meanwhile, women are also passive in terms of filmic narrative in these two films. Through analysing *Caught* (dir. Max Ophuls, 1949) and *Rebecca* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), Mary Ann Doane has demonstrated that how the cinematic apparatus constructs women as “imagined” in the films with female protagonists directed by male directors.²⁶ She argues that though the storyline is led by a female character, the “mise-en-scene of cinematic elements, camera, projector and screen are

²⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 25.

²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, “*Caught* and *Rebecca*: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence”, in Thornham ed., *Feminist Film Theory*, 70-82.

explicitly activated as agents of narrativity”²⁷. In *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*, the female images are not only “imagined” by the cinematic apparatus, but also “imagined” by the male characters. Whilst Meimei and Yanan are looked at by the male characters, Mudan and Jianiang are depicted by them. Neither of them is a current being in the filmic narratives, but only exists in Mardar’s and Hu Xiaobing’s narration. Mudan is even depicted by men twice: first, Mardar tells her story to Meimei in the film narrative space; secondly, the videographer tells the audience her story out of the narrative space. In this manner, she is doubly imagined by men. Nevertheless, it is those “imagined” female images that arouse Meimei and Yanan’s feeling of inner lack. In short, male characters act not only as gazers of the female body but also as torchbearer of women’s self-exploration. Thus, both films embody male/subject and female/object paradigms in the filmic look and the narrative.

What is more, the directors emphasise the **cinematic-ness** in their films to show their complete manipulation of the visual presentation and narrative that highlights their subjectivity as authors. Lou Ye plays a narrative game by designing a videographer as the narrator and sometimes bursting into the narrative space through him. As Sears indicates:

“[t]hroughout the story of Mardar and Mudan, the narrator reminds us that he is its author, not merely its teller: ‘What else? Let me think’; ‘His past...could be...’; ‘Maybe Mardar is not simply a courier’; ‘What happens next? Well...’”²⁸

Cinematic-ness in *Lunar Eclipse* lies mostly in editing, lighting, and the interplay of sound and images. By frequently inserting abrupt scenes into the middle of the

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Searls, “*Suzhou River*”, 58.

narrative flow and creating unconventional interplays of sound and images, Wang Quan'an shows his "composition" of story without concealing it.

As discussed above, although these male directors partly surrogate their own bewilderment and feeling into the Chinese Veroniques, they objectify them as sexual beings at the same time through the filmic look. Thus, the identification relationship between the directors and Chinese Veronique is multiple. On the one hand, they use women's images to embody their sentimental feelings and expression. As several critics indicate, these films share some resemblances to western art films²⁹: the consideration of the human being's psychological world, the cinematic visual presentation, and the exquisite narrative, all present a tendency to feminine temperament. This recalls Tania Modlesk's statement that "though women are hysterics with respect to male desire, men may be hysterics with respect to feminine 'emotion'."³⁰ Therefore, to a great extent, women are more suitable for the directors' art pursuit. For that matter, their motivation for choosing women as the leading roles is similar to Kieslowski's, as he says that "*Veronique* is a typical example of a film about a woman, because women feel things more acutely, have more presentiments, greater sensitivity, greater intuition, and attribute more importance to all these things. *Veronique* couldn't have been made about a man."³¹ By the same token, these male directors also need a Chinese Veronique to present those sentimental feelings and identification confusion which very probably belong to themselves. On the other hand, their portrayals of female images are still confined to a male standpoint. When

²⁹ Several film critics, such as Sun Shaoyi, Sean Metzger and Damion Searls indicate that *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* embody more western-ness and cinematic-ness than the earlier Chinese films. Since I have already mentioned it above, I do not quote the content here.

³⁰ Tania Modlesk, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film", in Gledhill ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 331.

³¹ Krzysztof Kieslowski, "Pure Emotions: *The Double Life of Veronique*", original in *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, London: Faber & Faber, 1993. Quoted from the introduction book published with DVD of *The Double Life of Veronique*, 34.

interviewed with Sun Shaoyi, Lou Ye admitted straight away that he approached female characters from his own male point of view. When asked why he preferred to use women as the leading roles, he confessed that he liked making films about women – “because this profession [filmmaking] is nothing more than focusing the camera on objects... filmmaking is actually about looking... it is more interesting to look at the opposite sex than to examine the same sex.”³² That is to say, despite the fact that the films present distinct feminine temperaments in terms of themes, the visual pleasure inside is composed from a male perspective. Thus, though entrusted with the task of thematic representation, these women cannot yet escape being eroticised to be sexual objects by and for the male gaze and imagination. In other words, the Chinese Veronique who has a double life in filmic narratives acts as a double character for these male directors as well: an avatar and a sexual object.

6.4 The Double Life of Chinese Veronique: the Marginalised or the Mainstream

An analysis of the identification relationship between the filmmakers and the protagonists in the selected films reveals that the male directors do not endow the Chinese Veronique with subjectivity either in terms of filmic look or narrative, but only delegate them a task as avatars to accomplish the directors’ aesthetic and thematic pursuit in filmmaking. Hence, the desire, the lacks and the confusion of the Chinese Veronique actually belong to “him”: she is feeling his desire, looking for what he lacks, and carrying his confusion. Furthermore, as discussed in 6.2, the stories

³² An interview with Lou Ye conducted by Sun Shaoyi, “All Artists Are Narcissistic: An Interview with Lou Ye”, in Kong & Lent ed., *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema*, 246.

of the Chinese Veronique all deal with the issue of identification confusion in contemporary Chinese urban life. Thus, what these young male directors represent through their female avatars is exactly their own identification dilemma, their feeling of loss and lack in the present lives, and their journey of looking for the solution for the question “Who should I be?” So, what is the key point in their identity confusion? What do they hesitate and puzzle about? Who are they supposed to be and who do they hope to be? The answer lies in the two contradictory subjects in the double life of the Chinese Veronique.

As argued above, Meimei and Yanan are inspired by the stories of Mudan and Jianiang to embark on their journey of self-discovery because the latter two demonstrate another life of and for them. Then which elements in “that life” evoke in Meimei and Yanan the feeling of lack and void in their own lives? On the emotional level, as discussed in 6.3, to Meimei, it is how Mudan is looked for and loved by Mardar; to Yanan, it is Jianiang’s reckless pursuit of her personal life passion, her dream. Nevertheless, on the identification level, it is the distinct identity essence embodied in another life.

Working as an entertainment performer, Meimei lives an exciting and free life in the dazzling metropolis, compared with most conventional residents. However, her life, as well as her love relationship, is simultaneously as unstable and unpredictable as the glittering night life in Shanghai. By contrast, the love between Mardar and Mudan, which is constant till death, is idealised and romanticised, tallying with the conventional concept of love. To a degree, Meimei’s love life represents a sort of marginalised lifestyle, while Mudan’s love is closer to the mainstream ideology. In this manner, Meimei’s desire to be Mudan could be decoded as an analogy of how the

marginal is tempted by mainstream values and discourse. In other words, Meimei desires recognition via possessing the love that Mudan has. By the same token, what entangles Yanan is also the vacillating choice between the life of “the marginal” and “the mainstream”, though the direction of the temptation is reversed. Yanan has been satisfied with her life prospects, which are an approach to the mainstream values: to marry a wealthy man and enjoy a steady and easeful life. But then the freedom and passion in Jianiang touch her. Jianiang belongs to a marginalised group in contemporary Chinese cultural and sociological context, living a life filled with risk, turbulence, unpredictation and on the verge of becoming a mental patient, but without family or a steady job or stable relationship. Whereas Mudan’s love story tempts Meimei with social recognition from the mainstream ideology, Jianiang lures Yanan with the freedom, multiformity and excitement of a marginalised spiritual world. Therefore, the different essences of the double life of Chinese Veronique are the two contradictory social identities: the marginalised or the mainstream. Furthermore, though attracted by “that life”, neither Meimei nor Yanan totally devotes herself to it, but they hesitate and wander between their double lives. They do not make a choice by themselves till the end of the film. To a large extent, the problem of “to be the marginalised” or “to be the mainstream” is a dilemma where the Chinese Veroniques can never decide their own identities.

Similarly, Ye Tong is trapped in the same identification dilemma which is also launched by these contradictories. At the superficial level, Ye Tong’s vexation comes from her love triangle with two potential love choices: Peng Wei and Weidong. Peng Wei, a handsome, charming, bardian, and passionate rock ’n roll singer, attracts Ye Tong as soon as she encounters him and his music. However, as she asks him several times, “are you serious or not [to the relationship]?” She dares not devote herself to

the love of this “wanderer”, who stands on a marginalised cultural and ideological standpoint, with unreserved determination. By contrast, Weidong is a paradigm of a conservative and steady-going man who can provide his lover or wife a safe and comfortable haven. Therefore, to Ye Tong, it is not only a choice of men, but, rather, a choice of lifestyle, values and identity.

Thus, the “mission” of Chinese Veronique is unveiled, that is, as avatars to make a choice of identity for the male directors. What is more, “to be the marginalised” and “to be the mainstream”, is exactly the core of the dilemma of the post-fifth-generation filmmakers. Several theorists and critics like Dai Jinhua³³, Sun Shaoyi³⁴, Jenny Kwok Wah Lau³⁵ and other, have indicated that the Chinese filmmakers emerging after the Fifth Generation faced a more complicated cultural, economical and political context when they started filmmaking in the early 1990s. Since their opinions of this issue coincide to a great extent, I cite only the words of Sun Shaoyi here to describe the “embarrassing” state of filmmaking for the post-fifth generation:

Born in the 1960s and even 1970s, most of them [the filmmakers emergent after the Fifth generation], including Lou Ye and Wang Quan'an, witnessed the gradual deterioration of Communist ideology and the increasing marketisation of Chinese economy. Unlike their predecessors, these young filmmakers found themselves faced with two seemingly insurmountable obstacles after graduating... First, despite the “miraculous” takeoff of China's market economy, the government has not so far loosened its grip of the Chinese film industry... Second, although the control on what can be made remains largely intact, the

³³ Dai Jinhua, “A Scene in the Fog: Reading the Sixth Generation Films”, in *Cinema and Desire*, 71-98.

³⁴ Sun discusses this issue in two essays: “In Search of the Erased Half” and “All Artists Are Narcissistic”.

³⁵ Jenny Kwok wah, “Globalization and Youthful Subculture”, 13-27.

government nevertheless gradually withdraws from its financial commitment to most projects, which forces many filmmakers in China to confront and deal with the unpredictable market.³⁶

In short, to make films in contemporary China, they need to bear the double stress from the censorship and the market. Nevertheless, these young filmmakers are more or less impacted by the Fifth Generation, though their filmmaking presents distinct characteristics in themes and cinematic language. Lou once talked frankly about the influence from the Fifth Generation on them,

I remember Wang Xiaoshuai³⁷ said to me: “I absolutely won’t be influenced by the Fifth Generation.” I replied that this claim itself reflected the influence of the Fifth Generation, because if you say, “I am not the same as him,” you in fact have some relationship with him. Perhaps you are opposed to the Fifth Generation tradition, but it cannot be denied that you will somehow continue it.³⁸

However, the success of the Fifth Generation is not replicable for the post-fifth generation because of the transformed economical, political and cultural context in the 1990s. Therefore, at the very inception, identification is an embarrassing, complicated and tricky issue to this younger generation. On the one hand, they are not as lucky as the older generation who had opportunities to take up mainstream filmmaking – making films with government funding – soon after graduating from BFA. In an interview with Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou, Wang Xiaoshuai argues that even if they were offered an occupation in state-owned film studios, like himself being

³⁶ Sun Shaoyi, “In Search of the Erased Half”, 188.

³⁷ Wang Xiaoshuai is one of the representative directors of the post-fifth generation as mentioned in Chapter 1.

³⁸ Sun Shaoyi, ““All Artists Are Narcissistic”, 239.

assigned to the Fujian Film Studio after graduating, they could hardly get any opportunities to direct a film for several years.³⁹ It means that they are endowed neither with an identity of film directors in the mainstream film industry nor with an identity of “artists” in the mainstream cultural discourse. Hence, to adopt subcultural viewpoints and identity of marginalised artists becomes one of their practical options, whether they are willing or not. On the other hand, to make films outside of the government plan means taking political and financial risks at the same time. Thus, to some extent, the stories of Chinese Veronique demonstrate the collective dilemma of the post-fifth-generation filmmakers, especially of those who started filmmaking in the early 1990s.

Furthermore, they make their choices implicitly in their films. It seems that the distribution modes of their films, as well as their future careers correspond to the eventual destinies and choices of their Veronique. The end of *Suzhou River* is full of imagery of death and self-exile. Mudan, though she has a reunion with Mardar, is drowned in the Suzhou River. Meimei sets out on her journey of “being looked for by her lover as Mudan”, but will never be found because her lover, the videographer, will rather “close my [his] eyes and wait for the next romance alone”⁴⁰. Similarly, in terms of the release of *Suzhou River*, Lou chose to deal with the censorship negatively. The funding, the production, and the distribution of the film were all run outside the Chinese governmental production system. He screened the film in Rotterdam Film Festival before obtaining government approval, despite the fact that he should have

³⁹ In the interview, Wang said that he was told by the factory director that he needed to wait at least five years for an opportunity to direct a film and described the “desolation” in Fujian Film Studio that reflected the situation of most state-owned film studios at that time. Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, 310-311.

⁴⁰ Lines in the film. Chinese original:
于是我宁愿一个人闭上眼睛，等待下一次的爱情。

known the consequences from the lessons of Zhang Yuan and Tian Zhuangzhuang.⁴¹ Furthermore, after cooperating with Shanghai Film Studio in *Purple Butterfly*, he soon deviated from the censorship again in his further filmmaking career. Seemingly, Lou has settled down with his identity as a marginalised artist and does not have a strong expectation to return to mainstream filmmaking in China. Though he claims that he has tried to negotiate with the film bureau for the Chinese release of *Summer Palace* and *Spring Fever*, he in fact included some “sensitive” contents – such as the Tian’anmen Square Incident, nudity, homosexuality and exposing sexual material in these two films – which will definitely “push the buttons” of the censorship. However, the name of Lou Ye is much more prominent than Wang Quan’an and Guan Hu in China, especially among the educated youth represented by undergraduate students, in spite of the fact that he has been banned from filmmaking in China several times and his films have not been shown in Chinese cinema except *Don’t Be Young* and *Purple Butterfly*.

By contrast, Wang Quan’an designs Jianiang, the surrogate of the marginalised identity, to be dead. Though she is passionate in her life, she cannot escape the fate of being insulted, hurt, and finally “eliminated” by cruel reality. Yanan concedes to the mundane values by leaning her head on her husband’s shoulder when she “witnesses”⁴² the death of Jianiang. To some extent, Wang Quan’an follows Yanan’s option in his career life. In Chinese film arena, he is a low-key director. Neither embracing the mainstream ideology totally by making commercial films nor challenging the censorship by breaking the rules, he has made a compromise between

⁴¹ Both Zhang Yuan and Tian Zhuangzhuang have been banned from making films in Chinese state-owned studios for several years because of their screening of their films overseas without government approval in the early 1990s.

⁴² According to the timeline of the plots, Jianiang is already dead when Yanan sees her photo, so that Yanan witnesses Jianiang being crashed by a truck in her imagination.

the identities of “the marginalised” and “the mainstream”. Keeping his preference for art cinema, Wang has managed to continue filmmaking sustainably and all his films have been released in Chinese cinemas, inducing positive responses from film theorists and critics, and receiving awards on various international and domestic film festivals. However, he has never been popular, or even commonly known by Chinese mass audience.

Comparatively, Guan Hu’s filmmaking is not as sustainable as the former two. Although *Dirt* passed the censorship to be screened legally in China, and, according to Adam Lam’s critique, it is “a very self-conscious film... expresses the sense of alienation of young Chinese during the late 1980s and early 1990s,”⁴³ and cannot be seen as a great commercial success or influential art piece of the post-fifth-generation directors. In a word, *Dirt* has not gained great attention from either overseas film critics or the domestic audience. This is probably one of the reasons that made him stay away from the film industry for eight years till 2002. Or, from another perspective, he could not continue filmmaking smoothly as the former two directors because he has not settled the issue of his self-identification, like his Veronique Ye Tong who leaves Beijing alone without choosing either Peng Wei or Weidong.

Through comparing the different destinies of Veronique in these three films with the directors’ solution with censorship, a subtle relation between them can be identified: Veronique’s identity choices correspond to the directors’ choices in their true career lives. Furthermore, such choices have probably influenced their further development in their filmmaking career to a great extent, because the themes of these three films are similar, as argued above. Thus, as a director, the destiny of his film and

⁴³ Lam, *Identity, Tradition and Globalism in Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Feature Films*, 289.

his career life is not only determined by the film itself, but is also relevant to his identity standpoint, or, rather, his identity performance. “Who should I be” is thus an essential issue for the post-fifth-generation filmmakers to resolve. No wonder that they collectively show their preference for a “Veronique style” story in their early works. It is more than a coincidence.

The realm of superstitions, presentiments, intuition, dreams, bewilderment, and self-discovery is all about the complexity of the human being, which is the everlasting theme in artistic creation. It is no wonder that a number of directors, both the maestros and the junior, prefer to construct “Veronique style” filmic narratives and visual presentation. Starting with comparative analyses of Kieslowski’s *Veronique* and the films of Chinese Veronique, *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*, this chapter has gradually solved the following issues, namely, the theme of Chinese Veronique’s stories, the identification relationship between the male directors and the Chinese Veronique, and the essential contradictions leading to the self-identification dilemmas of both Chinese Veronique and the male directors.

A comparison of Kieslowski’s *Veronique* with the selected films brings forth three significant differences. First, the French Veronique’s sorrow and dissatisfaction is immanent; by contrast, the Chinese Veronique’s perplexity and void is acquired. Unlike Kieslowski who is probing the immanent dilemma of human beings, that is, the contradiction between one’s soul and body, these post-fifth-generation male directors are dealing with the issue of identification in a sociological sphere. Second, “the city”

acts as a different character in these films. To some extent, Kieslowski's filmic narrative space is a vacuum where the city, whether Warsaw or Paris, is only an insignificant background of the story of the human beings' inner world. In contrast, "the city" itself functions as an important character in the filmic narratives of the Chinese *Veronique*'s stories. Though sometimes it seems to be unintentional, the directors actually exhibit a landscape of the civilian lives in the modern Chinese metropolises – Shanghai and Beijing – in the 1990s. Hence, the stories of Chinese *Veronique* happen in a particular social background. Third, the portrayal of the heterosexual relations is different. Kieslowski's depiction of the relationship between Weronika/*Veronique* and the male roles does not contain any power affiliations. However, the portrayals of heterosexual relations in the selected films contain more sociological references than natural ones. Both images of the male characters and the portrayal of their relationships with the women tend to be considered as signifiers of a patriarchal society. Accordingly, in contrast with *Veronique*, the stories of Chinese *Veronique* embody much more sociological content, specifically, the economic, political and cultural status quo in contemporary China. If Kieslowski is delving into the immanent paradox of human beings, these Chinese directors are discussing the individual living dilemma between the personal passion/desire and the social context. Therefore, the films of Chinese *Veronique* tell not only individual stories, but also sociological stories.

Nevertheless, through analysing the narratives and visual presentation of the female images, the identification relationship between the male directors and the female protagonists in their films is revealed. On the one hand, in terms of plot, the directors endow the female characters with more behavioural positivity than their male counterparts. From this aspect, these male directors surrogate their subjectivity –

their feelings of lack, identity confusion, and desire of self-discovery – into the Chinese Veronique. On the other hand, in terms of spectatorship, the female images cannot escape from the paradigm of to-be-looked-at-ness when portrayed into close-ups and frame-like composition. The male directors, who have the privilege of manipulating the camera and the editing, objectivise the Chinese Veronique to be sexual beings from and for the male gaze. Then the Chinese Veroniques carry a double mission in the films: they are the avatars of the male directors that bear their burden of feeling and desire; they are also the imaginary sexual objects for the male-centred visual pleasure. The male directors' double/paradoxical cognition with the female roles unveils the hidden motives of structuring a film with female protagonists. Compared to men, women are better carriers of the theme that these directors try to represent in their films, because the characteristics of hysteria, sensitivity, and perplexity are usually attributed to female temperament. Meanwhile, to a large extent, filmmaking is actually a procedure for looking (to the filmmakers) and producing dream-like looking experience (to the audience). The male directors create their dreams – hallucinatory psychosis of desire – through focusing the camera on female objects.

Since the Chinese Veroniques function as avatars, their bewilderment can be considered as a mirror of the real dilemma of the male directors. The analysis of the distinct identity signifier implied in the double life of Chinese Veronique point out two opposite identities signified: the marginalised and the mainstream. That is to say, the essential content in these women's dilemma is the identity confusion between "to be the marginalised" or "to be the mainstream". This is exactly the dilemma of these male directors who started filmmaking in the rapid changing society of China in the early 1990s.

Thus, what these male directors are searching for through portraying women's mirror confusion is a solution for their question of "who should I be". In a nutshell, they hide in the female images so as to make a choice of their self-identification. Identification, in Stuart Hall's approach, is a dynamic procedure, "a construction, a process never complete – always "in process".⁴⁴ Hence, identity is not a concept which can be stabilised, fixed or guaranteed as unchanging oneness or cultural belongingness underlining all other superficial difference. In Hall's words,

[T]his concept of identity does *not* signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same', identical to itself across time. Nor – if we translate this essentialising conception to the stage of cultural identity – is it that 'collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "self" which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.'⁴⁵

From his perspective, a discursive identity is not a stable or inherent subject, but an issue which can be changed, chosen and played.

Furthermore, to settle on an appropriate discursive identity is a necessary precondition for the directors to "speak" in the corresponding cultural context. The different developments of these directors' filmmaking careers have plausibly demonstrated how the self-identification of the directors works in the cultural discourse. Although all the selected films address a similar theme, the directors' further developments have been very different after they made the films selected in

⁴⁴ Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?", 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

this chapter. Lou Ye, who chooses to speak from the position of marginality, is most famous among the three. After *Suzhou River*, all his films have been controversial and aroused great attention both overseas and in China, although most of them are not permitted to be released in China. By contrast, Guan Hu has dealt with the film bureau conservatively and submissively. In spite of the fact that *Dirt* was self-financed by the filmmaking crew, he eventually managed to screen the film in Chinese cinemas legally through buying release permission from inner-Mongolian Film Studio. However, the “good” boy has not been rewarded well. *Dirt*, though achieving a certain level of recognition in terms of cinematic technique and cultural significance, has not won a success in either the commercial or critical realms. Comparatively, Wang Quan’an’s development in filmmaking has been relatively smooth and quiet. He insists in artistic-style creation, but avoids conflict with the censorship at the same time. Though the quantity of his works is similar to that of Lou, his name is not as well-known as Lou Ye.

Certainly, the success of a director is determined by various conditions so that I cannot simply ascribe these directors’ success or failure to their identification. However, it seems that the post-fifth-generation filmmakers have realised the necessity of self-identification from the inception of their filmmaking career. Nevertheless, identification, to this generation, is not an issue as easy as it was to the Fourth and Fifth generations who took up filmmaking at a time when the economic, political, and ideological situation was relatively stable and uniform in China. Therefore, the post-fifth-generation directors collectively deliver their confusion and desire of identification in their early works through structuring the narratives of women’s bewilderments.

What is more, since (as Hall argues) identification is a dynamic construction never complete, these directors' choices of self-identity discussed in this chapter should not be considered to be a persistent but a temporal state. With the change of Chinese society and the film industry, as well as their individual career pursuit, their identification will always be in process. I will continue to delve into this issue in the following chapters.

Chapter 7

How Close to Independence?

After the (Self-)Proclaimed Independent Directors “Return Home”

Independent Production¹ is a new film production concept introduced in China in the early 1990s. Although the peak time of Chinese mainland independent production has only lasted approximately ten years, it is an important movement that has significantly influenced the development of Chinese film production at the turn of the century. Moreover, most of the representative post-fifth-generation filmmakers, such as Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuechang, have been part of the wave of independent filmmaking from the start of their filmmaking career. However, they collectively returned to the mainstream film production at the beginning of the 21st century. The films analysed in this chapter, namely *Seventeen Years* and *Purple Butterfly*, were both co-produced by the state-owned film production studios and the directors, who have been acclaimed as the pioneers of the Chinese underground/independent filmmakers. Since the literal translation from the Chinese title of *Seventeen Years* is “Return Home at Spring Festival”, I borrow “return home” from this title to describe the independent filmmakers returning to work within the censorship. In this context, both films are these directors’ transitional works as they “returned home”. However, they have subsequently taken totally different paths in their filmmaking careers: Lou Ye has reverted to independent production whilst Zhang

¹ The terms “Independent Production” and “Independent Films” used in this thesis are very different from its usual definition when describing non-Hollywood production in the USA, as it will be soon defined in 7.2.

Yuan has remained in the mainstream film industry. I plan to illustrate the reasons for this through the comparative analysis of these two films.

Before starting the case studies of the selected films, it is necessary to introduce the independent film production movements in mainland China. In 7.1, I will first define the term “independent film/production” used in this thesis, which has a distinctive significance in the contemporary Chinese political, economical and cultural context compared with that in the western context, and then briefly review the development of it in mainland China. The analysis of Lou Ye’s *Purple Butterfly* will start from its double failure in the box-office and among critics. In contrast with the low budget of Lou’s previous film works, *Purple Butterfly* was supported by abundant funding and a very professional crew. However, it did not win applause as *Suzhou River* had from either western or Chinese critics. Though the film had already attracted great attention before its screening, the box-office result was disappointing. In 7.3, I will try to unveil the reasons behind this film’s double failure by analysing its plot, narrative, and visual presentation style, as well as the director’s intentions. Since Lou Ye shows a preference for women in the leading roles in his films, I will compare the female protagonist in *Purple Butterfly* with that of *Suzhou River* to illustrate whether Lou portrays women from different standpoints in his films made within and outside the censorship. By contrast, Zhang Yuan’s *Seventeen Years*, which I will analyse in 7.4, has brought Zhang Yuan a very different career future. Though it has not generated great box-office income, which can be explained by its small budget production and promotion, *Seventeen Years* has been much better accepted than *Purple Butterfly* by the mass audience. Unsurprisingly, the smooth distribution of this film opened the door of the domestic mainstream film industry for Zhang Yuan who strode into it with pride. Henceforth, all his films have been released in China with

government permission. In contrast with Lou Ye who returned to independent production after *Purple Butterfly*, Zhang Yuan has developed and sustained his career within censorship sustainably. Through analysing the plots, narrative and filmic presentation of *Seventeen Years*, I propose to demonstrate how Zhang Yuan achieved his “return home”. Coincidentally or not, *Seventeen Years* is not only his first cooperation with state-run production, but also his first film with a female leading role. Therefore, I want to uncover the probable discursive conversion hidden in this switch of the protagonists’ gender. Meanwhile, the demonstration of the so-called independent filmmakers’ journey between the marginalised and the mainstream will lead to a discussion of the meaning of **independence** in the contemporary Chinese context. Dai Jinhua argues that the Chinese independent filmmakers “constituted a particular **cultural position** and a particular **cultural gesture**” and the role of the independent filmmaker “became a role worthy of imitating and performing”². In 7.5, I will argue whether independent production embodies, or to what extent it embodies, the spirit of freedom and resistance, or, whether it is just a unique cultural symbol and identity label.

7.1 An Introduction to the Contemporary Independent Films in Mainland China

In the last decade of the twentieth century, mainland Chinese independent films stormed into the West constantly, and the concept of independence gradually became

² Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 91. My emphasis.

a new trend of domestic filmmaking. The terms used for mainland Chinese independent film is variable, depending on the different foci and standpoints of different regions: they are named as “independent filmmaking” or “new documentary movement” in mainland China, as “Chinese underground films” or even “Chinese dissenter films” in Euro-America, as “mainland underground films” in Hong Kong and Taiwan.³

In order to avoid imprecision, “the independent film” must be defined in a native context in mainland China. In the West, an independent film can be defined with financial criteria, because their film market and industry is relatively mature and complete. Western independent films are those outside the monopoly capital and grand film studios, in contrast with the **mainstream films** or **commercial films**. However, from the very beginning, the concept of “independent films” in Chinese context has been extremely confusing. The term “Independent production” can refer to the political, economic, or cultural features of a film. Since government funding and censorship still plays an important role in film production in China, the definition of independence must be related to the governmental film institution with respect to financial, production and distribution spheres. In “A Scene in Fog: Reading the Sixth Generation Films”, Dai Jinhua defines the Chinese independent filmmakers of the 1990s as those “who are either self-financed or have European Cultural Fund underwriting, and who make low-budget features that are separate from the official film production and censorship system”⁴. Developing her argument, I have reached a relatively more detailed definition of independent film in mainland China:

The (mainland) Chinese independent films (after the establishment of the

³ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 74. My summary.

⁴ Ibid., 75.

People's Republic of China in 1949) refer to those films produced outside the state film institution. All the financial resources of such film productions are attracted from the individuals, private enterprises, or various arts funding by the filmmakers.⁵

In spite of the fact that some of these films bear the label of a state-owned film studio in order to complete the required censorship procedure, if they are not financed by official funding, they are still included in the discussion of this chapter. Additionally, the main creative crew, especially the director of the film, should be from mainland China. Since this thesis focuses only on feature films, I will not discuss the independent documentaries and short films here.

In 1990, Zhang Yuan completed his first film *Mama* by self-financing. This film, which was later regarded as “the first independent film in China”⁶, was sent to more than a hundred international film festivals⁷ by Zhang Yuan himself without government approval, and won great honours at several famous festivals such as Berlin international film festival⁸. The young Chinese filmmakers after the Fifth

⁵ Huang Yin, *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Contemporary Chinese (Mainland) Independent Films* (存在还是消亡——中国大陆当代独立电影发展研究), a thesis submitted of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Film Studies (Shanghai: Shanghai University, 2006), 1.

⁶ Although *Mama* was released by Xi'an Film Studio, it is still regarded as the first Chinese mainland independent film by some scholars such as Dai Jinhua. Her argument is based on two evidences: 1. the film is self-financed; 2. the overseas exhibition of the film was against the Chinese legislation at the time that said no film from China was allowed to be exhibited overseas without permission from the Chinese film bureau. Zhang Yuan also claimed in an interview that *Mama* was the first independent film in mainland China after 1949. Sun Shaoyi & Li Xun, “The Interest in the Concept of Maximum Social Tolerance and Equality: An Interview with Film Director Zhang Yuan”, *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* (Social Science Edition) 28, 4 (2006): 69. Chinese original:

1990 年，我拍了第一部影片《妈妈》，它是 1949 年以来中国第一部独立影片，是我朋友资助的。

⁷ Zhang Yuan mentions that he has exhibited *Mama* in more than one hundred international film festivals, in an interview with Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou. Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera doesn't Lie*, 110.

⁸ Since 1991, “*Mama*” has won several awards in international film festivals, such as the Jury Award and a Special Mention at the 1991 Festival Des Trois Continents in Nantes, the Director in Particular Award at 1992 Swiss International Film Festival, the Best Comment Award at the 1992 Berlin International Film Festival, and the European Critics Feipuleixi Award at 1992 Edinburgh International

Generation started to attract the attention from western critics simultaneously. According to Tony Rayns, a European scholar of Chinese cinema, “*Mama* is still an astounding film in today’s Chinese film circles. Coming from the hand of a very young Film Institute graduate, it is no less than a courageous achievement.”⁹ Encouraged by this success, Zhang immediately undertook a second feature, *Beijing Bastards*, which was completed almost exclusively with the collaboration of his colleagues, classmates and friends and was never intended either to enter the official production system or to make any concessions to censorship. Meanwhile, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang’s classmate in BFA and the co-writer of *Mama*, burst onto the film scene with his directorial debut *The Days* (冬春的日子, Dongchunde rizi, 1992). Similar to Zhang, Wang pulled together the production fund, around 200,000 RMB in amount, from several friends.¹⁰ The film not only won the Best Film and Best Director prizes at the Italian and Greek film festivals, but was also collected by the New York Museum of Modern Art and selected by the BBC as one of the one hundred films chronicling world film history. He Jianjun (何建军), who attended advanced studies in the directing department of BFA (1988-1990), was also at the vanguard of Chinese independent filmmaking. After buying thirty rolls of 16mm black and white film, he started to make *Red Beans* (悬恋, Xuanlian, 1993) when he had only a meagre fund of 5000RMB. Fortunately, the postproduction of the film was sponsored by a domestic cultural development corporation. Like his colleagues Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai who harvested a number of awards at various international film festivals, he won the International Critics Fipresci Prize at 1994 Rotterdam

Film Festival.

⁹ Tony Rayns, “Future: Astounding!”, originally published in *Sight and Sound*, supplement to the 1992 London Film Festival. Quoted from Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 83.

¹⁰ Wang Xiaoshuai describes how he borrowed money from his friends to make *The Days* in an interview. Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn’t Lie*, 311-312.

International Film Festival with his maiden work.

While these young directors were gaining recognition and acclaim in the west, SARFT placed a ban on the directors of seven films, namely, *Blue Kite* (蓝风筝, Lanfengzheng, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *Beijing Bastards, Roaming Beijing* (流浪北京, Liulang beijing, dir. Wu Wenguang, 吴文光, 1990), *I've Graduated* (我毕业了, Wobiyele, dir. Shi Jian, 时间, 1992), *Shooting Finished* (停机, Tingji, dir. Ning Dai, 宁岱, 1993), *The Days*, and *Red Beans*, announcing it in several cinema journals. However, the ban did not stop them from making films. They were only excluded from making or distributing films in the film production system endorsed by the Chinese government; they did not suffer any political suppression. Nevertheless, they were not born under the same lucky star as their predecessors – the Fifth Generation – who became the pillars of the Chinese film institutes soon after graduating from BFA. Even if there had been no ban, they would hardly have gotten opportunities to make films in the official system because of the huge changes of the film industry environment in the early 1990s.¹¹ Conversely, the overseas successes of the films mentioned above introduced the independent production as a new career entrance for the young filmmakers after the Fifth Generation. Therefore, independent filmmaking “was becoming an undercurrent in Chinese film circles”¹² in the 1990s.

The period between 1996 and 2002 was the golden time of independent filmmaking in mainland China. Encouraged by the ebullient reception in the west, veteran independent filmmakers as Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and He Jianjun were

¹¹ Since Deng Xiaoping performed his Southern Tour and reinvigorated the reform process in 1992, China has sped up opening and developing socialist market economy. From then on, the state-run film studios have gradually lost the active production ability but turn to be an empty shell selling “institutional brand” with which the films are allowed to be released, because the state fund does not play an essential role in filmmaking finance any more.

¹² Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 84.

persistently devoted to independent film production. After completing *Sons* (儿子, Erzi, 1996), a film in similar style to *Mama*, Zhang Yuan went on to make *East Palace, West Palace* on the basis of Wang Xiaobo's (王小波)¹³ script, which addresses a homosexuality theme. This film was sponsored by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, and its postproduction was completed by a French editor in Paris. In spite of the disapproval of the Chinese government, the film was presented at several film festivals overseas, including the 1997 Cannes International Film Festival. Predictably, it evoked another round of ban from SARFT. Meanwhile, Wang Xiaoshuai made three films outside censorship during this period, namely *Frozen* (极度寒冷, Jidu hanleng, 1997), *So Close to Paradise* (扁担·姑娘, Biandan guniang, 1998), and *Beijing Bicycle* (十七岁的单车, Shiqisuide danche, 2001). He Jianjun is less famous than Zhang and Wang, yet his following two works, namely *Postman* (邮差, Youchai, 1995) and *Butterfly Smile* (蝴蝶的微笑, Hudiede weixiao, 2001), have also won lots of applause at the film festivals, such as Rotterdam and Greece. Since then, more and more filmmakers have joined in this procession. Most of their works have caught the attention of western critics via screening in all kinds of international film festivals, such as Zhang Ming's *In Expectation*, Lu Xuechang's *The Making of Steel* (长大成人, Zhangdachengren, 1997), Liu Bingjian's *Men and Women*, Wang Chao's (王超) *Anyang Orphan* (安阳婴儿, Anyang ying'er, 2001), and Chen Yusu's (陈裕苏) *Shanghai Panic* (我们害怕, Women haipa, 2001). The most remarkable ones among these independent filmmakers are Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye, both of whom

¹³ Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) is one of most innovative Chinese writers in the 20th century. In 1992, he quit his job as a lecturer at Peking University and Renmin University and became a freelance writer. Much of his fictional writings are satirical portrayals of the social upheavals in China during his life time. He often used sexuality as a platform for exploring issues of human dignity and social repression. He became famous after he died suddenly of heart disease at his apartment in 1997.

are productive and famous. Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* can be regarded as one of the most influential Chinese films of the 1990s. Extraordinarily, the whole story is presented with quasi-documentary cinematography. This straightforward record of contemporary Chinese society and humanistic consideration of the subaltern interior has not only brought him glory in the western arena but also blown a breeze of realism into the domestic film industry. With more than ten awards for *Xiao Wu*, Jia was able to continue to make films sustainably with better funding. His second film, *Platform* (站台, Zhantai, 2000), which was co-produced with the funding from France and Japan, was selected by *Cahiers du Cinema* as one of the best ten films in 2002. Persisting in quasi-documentary style, Jia is christened as "the Chinese Abbas Kiarostami"¹⁴ by French film critics.¹⁵ Lou Ye is one of the rare fortunate post-fifth-generation directors who have had opportunities to make films in the official system soon after graduating from the academy.¹⁶ However, he remained almost unknown until *Souzhou River* was released. The film not only enchanted western critics, but also introduced Lou to a large domestic audience, the majority of whom were university students. Reputedly, it is one of the Chinese independent films with the broadest domestic appeal, despite the fact that it has not been released legally in China.¹⁷ Thanks to the "epidemic" of pirated DVDs, many Chinese audiences have gotten access to this film, which represents their first encounter with Chinese independent films. Nonetheless, Lou is the contemporary Chinese director who has had the longest conflict with the censorship. All of his films were banned by SARFT

¹⁴ Abbas Kiarostami (1940-) is an internationally acclaimed Iranian film director, scriptwriter, photographer, and film producer. He has a reputation for using child protagonists, for documentary style narrative films, and for using stationary mounted cameras.

¹⁵ Didier Peron named Jia Zhangke as the Chinese Abbas Kiarostami in the film review of *Platform* with the title of "*Platform: the Floating Chinese Youth*". Original published in *Liberation*, France, 29/8/2001. Quoted from Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, 376.

¹⁶ His first two films, *Weekend Lovers* and *Don't Be Young*, were produced by Shanghai Film Studio.

¹⁷ Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, 241.

since *Suzhou River*, except *Purple Butterfly*.

What is noteworthy is that some of the independent filmmakers are from other art fields. The production mode outside the official system provides these artists lacking professional filmmaking education backgrounds with opportunities to practise filmmaking, which could hardly happen in a government film studio. According to Jia Zhangke, the age of amateur filmmaking is coming in China with the fast development of digital video techniques and dissemination of the independent production concept.¹⁸ Inspired by this “amateur spirit”, many unprofessional filmmakers emerged with their filmic debut during this period, namely the painter Yang Fudong (杨福东) with *Unacquainted Heaven* (陌生天堂, Mosheng tiantang, 1997), the video-artist Kang Feng (康峰) with *Who Has Seen the Festival of the Wild Animals* (谁见过野生动物的节日, Shuijianguo yeshengdongwu de jieri, 1998), the writer Zhu Wen (朱文) with *Seafood* (海鲜, Haixian, 2001), the documentary director Li Yu with *Fish and Elephant*, the stage drama director Meng Jinghui (孟京辉) with *Chicken Poets* (像鸡毛一样飞, Xiang jimaoyiyang fei, 2002), and others. The diversified specialty backgrounds of these auteurs produce a multiplicity of film forms and styles. To a great extent, the independent filmmaking movement has created a platform for the presentation of culture diversity in China.

In 2003, seven independent directors, including He Jianjun, Ju Anqi (睢安奇), Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Xianmin (张宪民) and Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇), wrote an open letter to SARFT to express their dissatisfaction at being

¹⁸ Jia Zhangke, “The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return”, in *One Person's Impression: Complete Guidebook to DV*, ed. Zhang Xianmin & Zhang Yaxuan (Beijing: China Youth Publishing, 2003), 306-307.

“underground” and their desire to release films in Chinese cinema. Actually, Zhang Yuan, the initiator of this independent movement, has already come to an agreement with the Chinese film bureau through co-producing *Seventeen Years* with Xi’an Film Studio in 1999. After submitting this open letter, several other underground “pioneers” started to “return home” one after another. In 2003, Lou Ye’s *Purple Butterfly* was released with the label of Shanghai Film Studio and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* was eventually screened in mainland China after two years’ of negotiation with the censorship, which marks the beginning of his film career “above ground”. Soon afterwards, the cooperation between Jia Zhangke and Shanghai Film Studio was propagandised in high profile, and the filmic fruit of it, *The World* (世界, Shijie, 2004), was released domestically and overseas without difficulty. From then on, the independent film movement has been relatively muted with these directors’ collective return to the official production system. At the same time, however, it may be presumed that mainland Chinese independent filmmaking is coming into a new age in which the definition criterion will no longer be inside or outside the official production system. Today, I am not able to predict the outcome of this issue. At the very least, censorship remains a controversial issue between the filmmakers and the government in China.¹⁹

7.2 Synopsis of the Selected Films

Purple Butterfly is the fourth film directed by Lou Ye. After being forbidden to make films in the Chinese state production system for three years, Lou cooperated

¹⁹ I have made a relatively detailed review of the development of independent films in mainland China since 1949. See the details in Huang Yin, *To Be or Not to Be*.

with Shanghai Film Studio/Shanghai Film Group Corporation (上海电影制片厂/上海电影集团公司) to secure a legal release. The film was eventually released under the Chinese censorship, and then screened in cinemas, TV channels, and released on DVD.

The film's story begins in 1928 in Manchuria, where a young Japanese student, Itami (played by Toru Nakamura), is called back to Japan for military service. This tears him away from Cynthia (played by Zhang Ziyi), his clandestine Chinese lover. Returning from the train station, Cynthia witnesses the cruel murder, by Japanese extremists, of her brother and several others, who are all intellectuals agitating resistance to Japan. The film flashes forward to 1930s Shanghai. A subplot of the story of two other lovers is added to the film: a switchboard operator Yiling (Li Bingbing, 李冰冰) and her fiancé Situ (Liu Ye, 刘烨). When Situ is leaving for a business trip, these lovers say tender and romantic goodbyes amidst the fervent march made by passionate demonstrators protesting Japanese incursions into China. Soon after, however, Yiling is heartened by the news that her lover will return by train that afternoon. At the railway station, Situ is mistaken for an assassin hired to assassinate the head of the Japanese intelligence service by a Chinese resistance group named Purple Butterfly, to which Cynthia – now known as Ding Hui – belongs. Japanese spies also receive the information. In a bloody shootout, Ding kills Yiling by mistake. The chaotic situation is further complicated by Itami's return from Tokyo to assume the role of member two chieftain in the Japanese intelligence service. Situ is captured by the Japanese. Itami frees him after realising that he is not the assassin, but forces him to work as a spy for the Japanese. Meanwhile, the head of Purple Butterfly and Ding's current lover, Xie Ming (Feng Yuanzheng, 冯远征) learns of Ding's former

relationship with Itami and decides to use it to murder the leader of Japanese spies. Ding then is tormented by a conflict between love and patriotism. Itami invites Ding to a party where the leader will be present as well, and this motivates Xie Ming to organise the whole group in order to assassinate the leader. At the party, Itami tells Ding that neither the leader nor Xie Ming will show up, because the leader has flown to Tokyo and Xie has already been killed. All of a sudden, Situ bursts into the party to shoot at Itami and Ding, but is killed as a result. The film ends with a series of documentary video clips of the Japanese incursions in World War II.

Seventeen Years is the fifth feature film directed by Zhang Yuan, as well as his first work granted an official release in China. Zhang has been active in filmmaking in both the domestic and overseas spheres since he graduated from BFA in 1989. All his early works, including three features, *Beijing Bastards*, *Sons*, and *East Palace, West Palace*, and two documentaries, *The Square* (广场, Guangchang, 1994) and *Demolition and Relocation* (钉子户, Dingzihu, 1998), were banned by Chinese censorship because of their controversial themes and content, except his debut *Mama* which has only been screened in a restricted scope²⁰. He is thereby considered as a forerunner of the “independent filmmakers” since 1949. At the end of the 1990s, Zhang started to cooperate with government film production in making *Seventeen Years*, and eventually managed to screen it in Chinese cinemas and release it on DVD. He then terminated his underground filmmaking and converted to work within the state censorship system. The film won ten awards in a variety of international film festivals. In any case, *Seventeen Years* is one of the significant works in his filmmaking career.

²⁰ *Mama* is permitted to screen only for the audience from Ministry of Education of PRC.

The film is set in the outskirts of Tianjin. Two divorcees marry, each bringing a daughter of a similar age into their new family – the mother's daughter Tao Lan (played by Liu Lin, 刘琳) and the father's daughter Yu Xiaoqin (Li Jun, 李涓). These two girls attend the same high school and sleep in the same bedroom, but could not be more different. Tao is wild, while Yu is elegant and diligent. They quarrel almost every day, even without a reason. One day, Yu steals five RMB from her father, which triggers the conflicts between the parents. She put the money under the pillow of Tao to frame her as the thief. Driven by blind rage, Tao hits her stepsister's head with a stick on their way to school. To the surprise of everyone, Yu dies and Tao is imprisoned. The film then cuts seventeen years into the present. Tao has been selected as one of the lucky inmates to be allowed a furlough during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) holiday. At the same time, a young female prison guard, Chen Jie (Li Bingbing) is going home for the holiday. While waiting for the inmates to be picked up by their families, Chen soon notices that Tao is the only one left behind. Out of mercy, Chen offers to escort Tao home. Upon arriving at Tao's old apartment, however, both women discover that the home has long since been torn down, and her parents have moved to another part of the city. Perceiving that Tao is afraid of seeing her parents, Chen is now determined to send her home. The two set out in search of the parents who may not want to see their only daughter. They eventually get to the aging parents' new home where Chen becomes an eyewitness to the difficult reunion – the girl's remorse, the mother's anxiety and fear, and the stepfather's silent struggle to overcome his pain to find forgiveness. The film concludes with a warm scene: the family reunites with understanding, forgiveness, and love. Chen leaves silently.

7.3 An Awkward Film about an Awkward Woman

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Lou Ye gained recognition and applause on the international and Chinese cinema arena with *Suzhou River* in 1999. In spite of the fact that he had already directed two films within the Chinese cinema censorship which allowed them to be screened legally in China, it was *Suzhou River*, the film made in an independent production mode, which actually introduced him to many film critics and audiences domestically and overseas. From then on, Lou has been hailed as an important member of the mainland Chinese independent filmmakers. At the turn of the twenty-first century, some independent filmmakers who already enjoyed some reputation started to seek opportunities to make films within the official system and release them in China legally. The cooperation between Lou Ye and Shanghai Film Studio on *Purple Butterfly*, in a sense, can be regarded as a result of this “return home” tendency. With the achievements of his previous film *Suzhou River* (among western critics), *Purple Butterfly* was an anticipated piece of work that attracted a considerably larger investment. The funding of the film of approximately twenty million RMB secured a sizable budget which made possible a significant marketing campaign as well as the casting of famous film stars, such as Zhang Ziyi, Liu Ye, and Li Bingbing. Moreover, as a co-production between an “illustrious” young independent director and the state-run studio, the film attracted great attention from critics and mass media during its production. This film was expected to make the festival rounds and gain reasonable box-office rewards. However, things did not turn out as expected. Except for being nominated in 2003 Cannes Film Festival, it did not win any awards at international festivals. Meanwhile, though Lou managed to screen

the film domestically, the box-office returns of less than one million RMB²¹ was not delightful at all. Hence, this section will delve into the reasons behind the double loss of this film.

As if by prior agreement, several Chinese scholars, such as Wang Yichuan²², Li Xin²³ and Zhou Qiang²⁴, use the words “Milihuanghu” (迷离恍惚) and “Pushuo mili”(扑朔迷离), which contain multiple meanings including mysterious, moony, absentminded, blurred, unintelligible, illusive, and so on, to describe the narrative and visual presentation of *Purple Butterfly* in their essays. In Chinese traditional culture, “butterfly” tends to be viewed as a sign of such meanings, originating from the allegory of “Butterfly Dream of Zhuang Zhou” (庄周梦蝶). Zhuang Zi²⁵ writes in his “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (《庄子·齐物论》) that

Once Chuang Chou²⁶ dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakeable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he

²¹ According to the resource on sina website, the box-office receipts of *Purple Butterfly* access to one million RMB. Web article, “A Fact in Film Industry in 2003: Movie Stars Cannot Save the Box-Office (明星不是票房救世主, 2003 年电影市场现实一种)”, accessed Dec. 15, 2010, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2004-01-12/0838275460.html>.

²² Wang Yichuan, “Where Will the Purple Butterfly Go? (紫蝴蝶飞向何方?)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5 (2003): 27-29.

²³ Li Xin, “The Bewildering Purple Butterfly (迷离恍惚的《紫蝴蝶》)”, *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* (Social Sciences Edition) 1 (2005): 84-86.

²⁴ Zhou Qiang, “An Outmoded Auteur Statement: A Cultural Study of *Purple Butterfly* (不合时宜的作者宣言——电影《紫蝴蝶》的文化分析)”, *Dangdai dianying* 1 (2004), accessed Jan. 8, 2010, http://www.lw23.com/paper_37276411_5/.

²⁵ Zhuang Zi is an honorific suffix literally Zhuang Zhou (庄周), an influential Chinese philosopher who lived around the 4th century BCE during the Warring States Period. Meanwhile, “Zhuang Zi” is also the title of the book by Zhuang Zhou.

²⁶ Chuang Chou is another Romanisation of Zhuang Zi which is romanised according to the Wades System.

was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.²⁷

From then on, the images of the butterfly are used to describe illusive, dream-like, and bewildering situations and states. As if responding to its title *Purple Butterfly*, the film's plot, its narrative, and its visual presentation are all obscure and bewildering. In agreement with the scholars mentioned above, I describe this film as an awkward film. More specifically, it is a film depicting a woman's awkward situation composed with an awkward cinematic expression; furthermore, the film itself is an awkward case in the contemporary Chinese film industry because the director adopts an awkward cultural discourse. In order to justify this opinion step by step, the awkwardness of *Purple Butterfly* will be analysed in three layers respectively, namely, the awkward situation of Cynthia (the female protagonist in the film), the awkward filmic style, and the awkward discourse.

7.3.1 Cynthia's bewildering dilemma

To name Cynthia²⁸ as the leading role of the plot in *Purple Butterfly* might be challenged because it tells a story constructed with multiple storylines and various characters. So a brief justification of Cynthia's position is necessary at the beginning of this section. The film's plot consists of four parts: the story of Cynthia and Itami in Manchuria, the story of Situ and Yiling, the story of Cynthia, Xie Ming and their resistant group "Purple Butterfly", and the story of all of them. In such a complicated

²⁷ Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 49. Chinese original:

昔者庄周梦为蝴蝶，栩栩然蝴蝶也，自喻适志与！不知周也。俄然觉，则蓬蓬然周也。不知周之梦为蝴蝶与，蝴蝶之梦为周与？周与蝴蝶，则必有分矣。此之谓物化。

²⁸ Cynthia changes her name to be Ding Hui in the second half of the film. To avoid confusing, I will only use Cynthia as her appellation in this thesis.

story, several characters share important tasks in the narrative besides Cynthia, such as Itami, Situ and Xie Ming. However, it is Cynthia who links all these characters together. As Itami's ex-lover and as a member of a resistant group, she takes the responsibility of collecting information for the group by seducing Itami. As a killer, she kills Yiling (Situ's girlfriend) by mistake, thus dragging Situ into this scuffle which is supposed to be totally irrelevant to him. In a word, Cynthia is the pivotal character in the whole story – all those male characters fight against each other around her. From this aspect, she shoulders the burden of the leading role in the filmic narrative.

However, in terms of behaviour, Cynthia is the only character without a behavioural "motive" in the film. In contrast, all other characters have explicit behavioural motives. Yiling is an innocent girl who intoxicates herself with the love of Situ, and his motive turns from love to "revenge" after Yiling is shot accidentally. As a Japanese intelligence agent lurking in Shanghai, Itami's motive is to complete his secret mission. Simultaneously, Xie Ming, the leader of a local anti-Japanese group, is keen on assassination and preparing to sacrifice his own life at any time. The motives of Yiling, Situ, Itami, and Xie Ming can be simply summarised in one word, respectively: love, revenge, mission and patriotism. While all these characters are "marching" for their motives, Cynthia, despite being a brave and sharp-witted female assassin and functioning in a crucial role during the entire film, is trapped in a dilemma. On the surface, Cynthia's dilemma is generated by the contradiction between national interest and personal love. As a member of an anti-Japanese group, she must complete her mission by cheating on her ex-lover Itami. Meanwhile, as a woman, she is still in love with him, or, at the very least, still has feelings for him. Nonetheless, she is a passive lingerer in two dilemmas of "to kill or not to kill", and

“to love or not to love”. She might have a mission, but she is led by Xie Ming whose orders represent the national interest. She might love Itami, but their relationship is determined by his feelings. Neither her patriotism nor the desire for love is initiated by Cynthia herself. The painful recognition of her aimless life is best illustrated by the last scene: after having sex crazily with Xie Ming, Cynthia remarks: “I’m scared. Recently, I have always been wanting to cry.”²⁹ Yes, Cynthia wants to cry. She has not cried before because she has not found any reason to cry. Therefore, what engenders Cynthia’s dilemma is her inner aimlessness rather than the outer conflicts. As Wang Yichuan puts it, the key point of this film is to ask “are the individuals’ actions valuable [in historical discourse]?”³⁰ Lou has created a woman who is bewildered about the purpose of her action as well as her life in *Purple Butterfly*. By the same token, is Lou clear about his own pursuits in this film?

7.3.2 When the cinematic-ness encounters the climate-sickness

Compared to the twenty million RMB production costs, a box-office take of less than one million RMB is almost negligible. In Guangzhou, *Purple Butterfly* was eliminated from most theatres’ screen lists within one week of its premiere because of the pitiful attendance numbers.³¹ Though Lou declares that approximately thirty countries and regions have bought the copyright of the film³², its box-office revenue in China was without doubt a fiasco. According to the critiques from mass audiences,

²⁹ Lines from the film. 我害怕。我最近一直想哭。

³⁰ Wang, Yichuan, “Where Will the Purple Butterfly Go?”, 25. 由此可见，影片想追问的是这样一个问题：人的个体生存行动真的有价值吗？

³¹ Accessed Jan. 8, 2011, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2003-07-31/1633179510.html>.

³² When interviewed by Ni Zhen, Lou Ye indicated that about twenty countries and regions bought the copyright of *Purple Butterfly* before its filming, and then around ten more bought the copyright after watching the sample. Ni Zhen & Lou Ye, “To Feel the Creation in the Exploration (在追寻中感受创作)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5 (2003): 7.

mass media and some film theorists, this fiasco can be mainly attributed to the film's obscure visual presentation and unintelligible editing. Searching for the articles related to *Purple Butterfly* on the internet, I find that the majority of the comments from mass audiences are negative. The comments focus on the narrative mode and visual style. Some audiences in Shanghai indicate that "the film is permeated with a gloomy tone and filled with pictures containing neither dialogue nor gesture, which leaves us in a fog about the plots"³³. A complaint from a Guangzhou audience is more acrid: "Instead of entertaining us, some directors are torturing us with the production resource they handled. And damn! We spent money on it!"³⁴ In short, quite a few audiences complain that they can neither understand the story nor enjoy the pictures in this film. Besides the average movie-goers, some film theorists also say that the disjointed narrative and obscure visual presentation hinder appreciation. Despite being a professor in film studies, Wang Yichuan admits that even he is puzzled by *Purple Butterfly*.³⁵ Li Xin's argument is more detailed,

Like an iceberg floating on the sea, the film [*Purple Butterfly*] is composed with simplified [sometimes even deleted] portrayals of some crucial plots. The actors' subtle performance as well as the confusing editing presents only a small portion of the story, but leaves too much imaginary space, that handicaps the audience from understanding the plots' development and the characters' emotions.³⁶

³³ Web article, "*Purple Butterfly* in North and South China ("紫蝶" 南北冷暖各不同 上海票房三天 40 万)", accessed Jan. 8, 2011, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2003-08-03/0837180422.html>. 上海的一部分观众认为影片中充斥着灰暗的色调以及很多既无对白又无肢体语言的情节, 让他们看得一头雾水。

³⁴ Web article, "*Purple Butterfly* Suffering Box-Office Failure in Guangzhou (《紫蝴蝶》广州上映票房惨败)", accessed Jan. 8, 2011, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2003-07-31/1633179510.html>. 这些导演掌握这么好的资源, 拿着摄像机, 不愉悦我们反而折磨我们! 真是拿钱买罪受。

³⁵ Wang, Yichuan, "Where Will the *Purple Butterfly* Go?", 27.

³⁶ Li, Xin, "The Bewildering *Purple Butterfly*", 86. 影片不但省掉或简化转折性场景或关键动作, …… 大多数时间演员都非常内敛的表演、再加上令人迷惑的剪辑, 使影片就如海水中的冰

Studying the visual presentations and narratives of all the films by Lou Ye to date, it is not difficult to detect that he always concentrates more on cinematic-ness than on narration. In a sense, his filmmaking is deeply influenced by the concept of the “auteur film”. It is beyond reproach for a director to maintain his own filmic style. However, it is obvious that the average movie-goer in China cannot appreciate the narrative and visual presentation style in *Purple Butterfly* at all. As Nie Wei argues, this film embraces the concept of “auteur film”, and then deviates from the conventional aesthetic taste and film appreciation of most Chinese movie-goers.³⁷ As if being climate-sick, as soon as Lou brought his film into Chinese cinemas, his cinematic presentation style, with which *Suzhou River* won lots of applause domestically and overseas, was totally rejected.

Even if we put aside the issue of climate-sickness, it seems that the practice of cinematic-ness in *Purple Butterfly* has not been accepted well overseas, either. Some western critics share similar opinions on this issue to those expressed by Chinese scholars mentioned above. For example, Kirk Honeycutt says that “Rain and darkness often obscure the action. Even more problematic is an editing style that interpolates past actions with present, making it difficult to follow story developments”.³⁸ As mentioned above, Lou has not harvested anything at international film festivals with *Purple Butterfly* as he did with *Suzhou River*. Thus, the visual presentation and the editing of *Purple Butterfly* actually block the description of the plot. Compared to the cinematic presentations in Lou’s other films such as *Suzhou River* and *Summer*

山一样，观众看到的只是浮出水面的部分，许多更深沉复杂的东西，只能凭借想象去体会、去阐释。……这给观众清晰的理解影片情节发展和人物内心显然带来了许多障碍。

³⁷ Nie Wei, “The New Generation Movie and the Cultural Representations of Contemporary Metropolises (新生代电影与当代都市的文化表达)”, *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University* (Social Sciences Edition) 1 (2005): 77. 在我看来主要原因在于它受到“作者电影”的观念影响，脱离了传统的叙事模式和审美习惯。

³⁸ Kirk Honeycutt, “Review: *Purple Butterfly*”, *In Competition*, Jan. 1, 2005, accessed Jan. 10, 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1877855.

*Palace*³⁹, which also embody poetic narrative style but are still able to narrate the storyline reasonably, in my opinion, Lou's pursuit of cinematic-ness in *Purple Butterfly* is going too far. Some stylistic designs seem unnecessary, or, rather, unwise. First, most of his images are shot in extreme low-key light that submerges the whole film into darkness. Some crucial scenes and actions are thus hardly recognisable. One of my friends told me: "When I watched *Purple Butterfly* at home I thought that my DVD must have been damaged because most pictures are **too dark to make sense**." Another friend described *Purple Butterfly* as an "acoustical movie", "because," he said in an ironic tone, "a considerable portion of this movie can only be heard but not seen". Second, the cinematographer adopts many long takes and swing shots, but some of them are irrelevant to the rhythm of those particular scenes. For example, in the train station, the director used a long-take shot lasting nearly two minutes to portray Cynthia and her colleagues walking on the platform and then moving to a crossover. Technically, it is not necessary to use such a long-take shot to describe a plot interlude which lacks dramatic content. Furthermore, the camera keeps swinging when focusing on the three characters' movements, and this tends to cause vertigo in the audience. From either a technical or aesthetic approach, the length and swing of this shot are pointless. Thirdly, almost the whole film is edited with jump cutting. The narrative switches among several storylines, skips some crucial plots, breaks the timeline, and jumps from reality into imagination without reasonable logical links or hints. All these techniques eventually make an intriguing story unintelligible. If the cinematic-ness presented in his independent productions like *Suzhou River* can be considered as an individualised auteur statement, then his diligent endeavour at cinematic-ness in *Purple Butterfly*, a film released in Chinese mainstream cinemas,

³⁹ I will intensively analyse this film in Chapter 8.

was a totally unwise choice.

It seems that the director had already realised that the mass audience would hardly accept the narrative of *Purple Butterfly*. In an interview with Ni Zhen, Lou stated that “*Purple Butterfly* is not a film telling a story and portraying characters in a conventional film narrative mode. If you have a stereotypical criterion for film narrative, then, I assure you that to watch *Purple Butterfly* in cinema will be a disaster.”⁴⁰ That is to say, he consciously chose a filmic presentation opposite to what people are accustomed to. So, why did Lou commit this mistake deliberately? This leads to another issue, that is, what kind of discourse standpoint he adopts, and, what kind of identity he plays.

7.3.3 Is it possible to cut both ways?

In a sense, *Purple Butterfly* is a transitional film work for Lou Ye. In the Chinese cultural context (but not only in Chinese cultural context), the difference between the independent production and mainstream production is embodied not only in the areas of finance and distribution. Therefore, from *Suzhou River* to *Purple Butterfly*, what Lou must determine is the discursive stance to adopt in the spheres of both politics (for the government) and culture (for the audience): he must decide whether to maintain a sub-cultural discourse (or, somewhat, as we might also describe it as an elitist discourse) or to adopt a mainstream discourse. On this issue, Lou Ye chooses to be betwixt and between.

⁴⁰ Ni Zhen & Lou Ye, “To Feel the Creation in the Exploration”, 8. 《紫蝴蝶》不是一部按传统的模式和规范去讲故事，去展示人物的影片。如果你预先有一个框子，认为这种叙述是电影，那种叙述方式不是电影，那么，我可以保证，你走进电影院看《紫蝴蝶》，绝对是一个灾难。

Lou has designed his narrative in some ways to reflect the governmental ideology and popular aesthetics. First, he chooses a particular historical period – the War of Resistance Against the Japanese – as the background of the story. Regarding this issue, the director indicates repeatedly that he focuses on portraying the individuals' experiences of hardship and feelings of bewilderment rather than duplicating historical scenes which are not duplicatable.⁴¹ Admittedly, the characters do not shout the slogan “overthrow Japanese imperialism” and state their patriotism like those in leitmotif films (主旋律电影, Zhuxuanlv dianying)⁴². However, the moral judgement embodied in the film – Japanese are evil invaders and Chinese are righteous defenders – is beyond dispute. Besides, the thematic choice itself is probably a strategy to deal with the censorship because the theme addressing China's national crisis is easy for the Chinese film bureau to consider as “significant”. What is more, though the director states that he does not aim to re-present historical events, he does endeavour to re-present a visual “old Shanghai” of the 1930s. Employing period visual elements such as trams, jewellery shops, printing house, cafes, whorehouses, grocery stores, vintage cars, balls, night clubs, newsboys, gramophones, women in cheongsams, as well as repeatedly playing the theme song “I Cannot Get Your Love” which presents a typical style of pop music in 1930s' Shanghai, the director manages to rebuild an elaborate filmic world of old Shanghai from a realistic perspective. The

⁴¹ In the interview with Ni Zhen, Lou emphasises repeatedly that “I firstly forget that it is historical theme, and at the same time an anti-Japanese one. ... I must transcend the stereotype of the film style of particular theme (historical theme). ... I focus on portraying the individuals' experiences and states in bewildering and hardship rather than duplicating the historical scenes which are unduplicated”. Ni Zhen & Lou Ye, “To Feel the Creation in the Exploration”, 7. 首先, 要把它是历史题材忘了; 同时, 要把它是抗日题材忘了。……不受既定的题材和风格的限制。……我更强调的是, 人在困惑和艰难处境中的真实的体验和状态的共同性, 而不是竭力去恢复那个不可能重现的“历史的原貌”。

⁴² “Leitmotif films, named as Zhu xuanlv dianying (主旋律电影) in Chinese, offer an official or officially-approved version of the past or contemporary society, embodying progressive official ideologies, with an emphasis on patriotism and nationalism.” I borrow the term “leitmotif film” and the definition of it from Chen Yunxiang's essay “The Seduction of Feminine Power: A New Trend in China's Leimotif films”, in *Cultural Interactions and Interpretations in a Global Age*, ed. Ji Fengyuan, Lin Jinhua and Susan Bouterey (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2011), 195.

whole filmic space is hence permeated with a nostalgic sentiment. This popular aesthetic element captivates the urban audience represented by the “petty bourgeois” (小资, Xiaozi)⁴³ living in China’s metropolises like Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou. The phrase “petty bourgeois”, which had a degraded connotation in Mao’s era, has become a fashionable phrase in China since the early 1990s, referring to the young urban residents who worship western ideology and life styles, pursuing material and mental enjoyment.⁴⁴ Besides the nostalgia, the icons of the colonial modernity in 1930s Shanghai themselves convey “petty bourgeois sentiments” (小资情调, Xiaozi qingdiao). In aesthetic terms, Lou attempts to cater somewhat to popular culture in contemporary China. In addition, the Chinese women in *Cheongsams* are fascinating images representing a cultural China in the western imagination. Thus, the art design of *Purple Butterfly* embodies a consideration for both domestic and overseas markets. Furthermore, telling a spy story situated during World War II, the film plot comprises various commercialised elements, such as spying, assassination, machination, suspense, gun-fighting, as well as romance and sex. Therefore, the plot design provides reasonable content to feed the popular movie-goers and thus contain certain commercial potential. Last but not the least, compared to the cast of *Suzhou River* in which Jia Hongsheng was a B-list actor and Zhou Xun was a new actress (before she achieved stardom), the cast of *Purple Butterfly* which includes Zhang Ziyi, Liu Ye and Li Bingbing can be described as superb. All three were popular movie stars in China at that time, and Zhang Ziyi had also achieved worldwide fame with the tremendous success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龙, Wohucanglong, dir. Ang Lee,

⁴³ The phrase “Xiaozi” (小资) is the abbreviation of “Xiao zichan jieji” (小资产阶级). It originally refers to the people who are not as poor as the proletariat but not as rich as the bourgeoisie. Today it rather becomes a cultural term describing a lifestyle chasing modern taste, living standards, and the arts.

⁴⁴ Feng Guo, “Petty Bourgeois in Shanghai and Their Movies (“上海小资” 与 “小资电影”)”, *Dangdai dianying* 5 (2007): 148-152.

2000). What is more, the icon of Cynthia – a beauty and a killer – inherits Zhang Ziyi's typical on-screen images as a woman warrior, as she did in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Rush Hour 2* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2001), which is well accepted by western audiences. From this perspective, the cast in this film is used as a tool to crack the commercial film market, including the overseas market. So Lou's marketing efforts with the art design, plot and the cast of this film are undeniable. What is more, in terms of ideology, compared with the images of female protagonists in Lou's other films, such as Meimei in *Suzhou River* and Yu Hong in *Summer Palace*, whose bewilderment is in their own love life, Cynthia's dilemma between nation and love is closer to governmental ideology.

Yet paradoxically, as mentioned above, *Purple Butterfly* is the most unintelligible of Lou's films. As he states: "What I do [in making *Purple Butterfly*] is to experiment with unconventional presentation in my cinematic techniques".⁴⁵ This thereby generates a paradox: the icons, the plot and the cast of the film endow the film with some commercial potential while the narrative, the cinematography and the editing estrange it from the mainstream market. For example, several gunshots and sex scenes are presented in the film, which are very probably intended to provide visual pleasure. However, the expressions of these long-drawn-out scenes are dark and obscure, eliminating the supposed visual pleasure. No wonder Wang Yichuan asks whether the director wants to produce visual temptation or to induce philosophical contemplation.⁴⁶ Conceivably, the experimental style is not easy for the mass audience to accept. Why did Lou make such an impractical (or, unwise) decision when making this film for release in mainstream Chinese cinemas? His own words

⁴⁵ Ni Zhen & Lou Ye, "To Feel the Creation in the Exploration", 8. 我是在电影手段的范围内，做最大限度的非规范性的尝试。

⁴⁶ Wang Yichuan, "Where Will the Purple Butterfly Go? ", 25.

can answer this question to a large extent:

The cultural posture of a film is not only embodied in the cognition and attitude of the characters, but also implied in the approach of cinematic presentation.

From my point of view, these two aspects are linked, or, rather, unified.⁴⁷

According to him, what lies behind the choice of the cinematic presentation is precisely the choice of the cultural posture and position. That is to say, he insists on a sub-cultural/elitist posture in his cultural standpoint rather than submitting to a mainstream one. As if drawing a boundary line between himself and the mainstream artists, Lou deliberately adopts ultra-unconventional cinematic expression in this film.

So what ultimately entraps *Purple Butterfly* into such a dilemma is now evident. On the surface, it is the conflict between the director's discursive standpoint and the film's distribution policy, but the core of it is the director's contradictory self-identification. On the one hand, it is tempting to Lou (it is very probably tempting to the majority of the directors) to establish himself as a mainstream director and to share the economical benefit and reputation that ensured. In the contemporary Chinese context, to make films within censorship and then screen them in cinemas is the only way to achieve this. Hence, Lou follows the stream of the independent filmmakers' "return home". On the other hand, he is not reconciled to being included in "the mainstream" with respect to culture, ideology and discourse. Thus, though the story as well as the distribution and promotion methods of *Purple Butterfly* resemble many other commercial and mainstream films, he must, at the very least, construct it with a different language, in this case, an unconventional, minority and elitist

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7. 对一部电影的文化姿态，除了对剧中人物的理解和态度以外，也包括对电影表述的态度在内。我的看法是，这两者是密不可分的，是完全统一的。

language. In a sense, Lou tries to cut both ways between the mainstream and the sub-cultural discourses. If he had succeeded, he might have become a grand master like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. However, the double failure of *Purple Butterfly* has demonstrated that, in the 2000s, Lou cannot replicate the myth of the Fifth Generation that made films in the mainstream production system while expressing elitist cultural standpoints at the same time. This explains Zhou Qiang's description of this film as a "historical misunderstanding"⁴⁸: Lou's endeavour to cut both ways is also a discursive misunderstanding. He eventually fails in his experiment to be a mainstream Chinese director with a sub-cultural standpoint. As mentioned above, Wang Yichuan concludes that the key question explored in *Purple Butterfly* is "Are the individuals' actions valuable [in historical discourse]?" From another perspective, this is a question for Lou Ye himself as well.

7.4 March on, My Girl! Destination: Home

In the 1990s, Zhang Yuan was an emblem of the pioneer avant-garde artist and a fighter in independent filmmaking. All his feature works before 1999 – *Mama*, *Beijing Bastards* and *East Palace, West Palace* – are considered to be significant independent films in China. However, in the early 2000s, he suddenly transfigured himself into a mainstream director in the Chinese film industry: his films are produced with commercial or governmental funding, popular actors, and, most importantly, released into Chinese cinemas and on copyrighted DVDs. At the turn of the century, Zhang Yuan travelled from underground filmmaking to the surface, that is to say, he ended

⁴⁸ Zhou, Qiang, "A Demoded Auteur Statement". 《紫蝴蝶》的出现在某种程度上可以说是一个历史的误会。

his independent production and turned to making films within the censorship. During this journey, *Seventeen Years*, his first feature film screened before a Chinese mass audience legally, actually played a principal role. In other words, through the production and distribution of this film, Zhang Yuan implemented a remarkable identification transition. In contrast to Lou Ye who wandered between the marginalised (or, elitist) and mainstream discourse, Zhang Yuan is very clear about the destination of this transitional journey. If the title of his early works *Beijing Bastards* can be considered as a declaration of his sub-cultural and marginalised standpoint at that time, by the same token, the original Chinese title of *Seventeen Years*, which literally means “returning home at the Spring Festival⁴⁹”, can be considered as his new declaration of returning to mainstream film production and discourse.

Seventeen Years tells a story about a girl, Tao Lan, who has been imprisoned for seventeen years for committing the manslaughter of her stepsister, and her return home with the help of a female prison guard at the Spring Festival. Through filming Tao’s journey home, which is full of her frustrations, deep ambivalence and moral qualms but which finally concludes with a happy ending, Zhang Yuan has actually constructed an allegory of “returning home” for himself. Just as Tao is eventually accepted by her family again, Zhang Yuan’s “new” film production career within censorship has been smooth. Moreover, Zhang Yuan has not only been accepted by the Chinese film bureau, but also by the general public. Emerging as an “avant-garde” artist and independent filmmaker, his works in the 1990s were always controversial or even rejected by the populace from the aspects of theme, narrative and visual

⁴⁹ The Chinese Spring Festival is the most important of the traditional Chinese holidays. It is often called the Lunar New Year, especially by people in mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. The festival traditionally begins on the first day of the first month in lunar calendar and ends on the 15th. According to Chinese tradition, it is the holiday for family reunification.

presentation. However, after the distribution of *Seventeen Years* he had managed to expand his “fans” from a small group consisting of “cultural elites” to the mass audience. In this manner, although the critics gave this film a mixed reception, the film has been successful for Zhang Yuan as his transitional work. To demonstrate how Zhang Yuan achieves his way home through making *Seventeen Years*, I will analyse three aspects of this film.

7.4.1 From prison to home

According to the plot, which is about some trivial conflicts in a blended family ending with a family reunion, *Seventeen Years* should be categorised as a melodrama of family ethics. Like *Mama* and *Sons* which are both about family ethics but are also Zhang Yuan’s illustration of some philosophical themes such as discipline, patriarchy, and the Oedipus complex, *Seventeen Years* can also be understood as an allegory of discipline and identity. Depicting Tao’s journey from prison to home, Zhang Yuan simultaneously presents his own mental journey from the marginalised to the mainstream.

First, Tao’s way home starts from a particular state apparatus: prison. In a sense, “prison” can be interpreted as a signifier of the film censorship in China. Foucault hypothesises that the prison “helps to establish an open illegality”⁵⁰. It reaches its target insofar as it gives rise to one particular form of illegality – **delinquency**:

[P]rison has succeeded extremely well in producing delinquency, a specific type, a politically or economically less dangerous – and, on occasion, usable – form of

⁵⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 276.

illegality; in producing delinquents, in an apparently marginal, but in fact centrally supervised milieu; in producing the delinquent as a pathologized subject. The success of the prison, in the struggles around the law and illegalities, has been to specify a ‘delinquency’.⁵¹

So, borrowing from Foucault, we can say that censorship – in this thesis, specifically, the Chinese film censorship today – functions as a discursive prison. As discussed in 7.1, none of the Chinese directors suffered from any physical or political suppression for their independent filmmaking in the 1990s. The only punishment imposed on them was a ban prohibiting them from making or distributing films in the state film system. The fact is that most of them continue to make films with self-financing or with funding from overseas. That is to say, they have never been deprived of the right to make films in China, but only excluded from the state-run and mainstream film industry. From Foucault’s perspective, the punishment by the censorship is to designate them and their filmmaking as “underground”, “illegal” and “delinquent”. Foucault also illustrates that the delinquency seems to sum up symbolically, “but which makes it possible to leave in the shade those that one wishes to – or must – tolerate”⁵². Therefore, independent filmmakers like Zhang Yuan are trapped into a discursive prison more than a factual one. So, to be set free from this prison, as Zhang Yuan implies in *Seventeen Years*, the only destination is **home** – the mainstream ideology. To some extent, this destination is not willingly chosen by Zhang Yuan/Tao himself/herself, but designated by the discursive power structure. As described in the film, the prison let Tao go home at Spring Festival as a **reward** for her good behaviour there. Hence, to go home is a privilege **granted** by the government. When Tao tells Chen Jie that she prefers to stay in the prison rather than return home, Zhang

⁵¹ Ibid., 277.

⁵² Ibid., 277.

Yuan composes the following dialogue between the prisoner and the prison guard to further depict her (and Zhang Yuan's) passive position.

Tao: I want to return to the prison. I don't want to go home now. I feel all right to stay there [the prison].

Chen (in an official tone): Do you think it is something you can decide by yourself? Don't you know that it is a reward granted by the government? Others are not allowed to go home even though they want to! ⁵³

Then Tao's journey home eventually continues on with Chen's company and exhortation, as well as Tao's repeated answer: "Yes Madame!" in a mode of conditioned reflex. Confronting the powerful mainstream ideology, individual expression seems feeble and exhausted. This is probably an important reason why Zhang Yuan and his "independent filmmaker colleagues" relinquish the **delinquent** condition.

Implying the necessity for Tao to return home, Zhang Yuan simultaneously expresses his anxiety and ambivalence about it. This scene in the film is especially resonant: when Tao tries to cross a crowded street, she stands in the traffic flow with an expression of panic, hesitation and bewilderment like a naive and scared child. As Chen puts it: "Today, everywhere is rebuilt again and again. Even I'm nearly lost. How can you [Tao] find it [the home]?"⁵⁴ Influenced by the swift and huge changes of the Chinese economic, political and cultural context in the 1990s, the mainstream film industry in 1999 was significantly different from that of a decade earlier. Thus, Tao's ambivalence and qualms about going home exactly mirror Zhang Yuan's situation at

⁵³ Lines of the film. 陶：我想回监狱，我不想回家了……我觉得里面挺好的。

陈：这是你想不想的事儿吗？这是政府对你的奖励，你知不知道？别人想回还回不去呢！

⁵⁴ Lines of the film. 这到处盖了拆拆了盖，我走着都晕，你根本找不着。

that moment. To her/him, home does not mean a familiar and warm haven any longer, but signifies a strange and risky environment, which is, to a degree, even stranger and riskier than the prison.

Using Tao's story, Zhang Yuan constructs an allegory of returning home that reflects his own position. To either Tao or Zhang Yuan, the journey from the prison to their home is one full of frustration and leads to an unknown future. However, though Zhang Yuan designs a happy ending for Tao, this does not mean that he himself will manage to reach his destination. Thus, besides the story, Zhang Yuan's endeavour of returning to mainstream discourse is also embodied in other spheres.

7.4.2 From a son to a daughter

Although the character Tao can be understood as an avatar of Zhang Yuan, their attitudes to going home are different. In contrast to Tao who always hesitates about going home, Zhang Yuan has actually shown an obvious eagerness to return to the mainstream ideology. However, this determination is not embodied in the character Tao but in another female protagonist, the prison guard Chen Jie, who plays an important role on Tao's way home.

To justify this opinion, the first question here is: Is it necessary for this female prison guard to emerge in this story? In terms of the explanation of the family's ethnic issues, this prison guard seems to be an outsider. In regard to the plot, Tao's journey home would probably contain more frustration and dramatic events without her help. In terms of Zhang Yuan's allegorical expression, her earnest instruction even impairs the expression of Tao's complicated mentality and emotion. If Zhang Yuan

deletes this character, will it seriously damage the presentation of the story or the theme? The answer is no.

Then, why does she emerge and even have a role almost as important as Tao on Tao's way home? When we discover that the film was supervised and subsidised by Chinese Ministry of Justice, the answer is easily unveiled: though Chen's emergence is not necessary to the narrative, it is essential in the discursive sphere. With this character, the film's political and discursive tendency towards mainstream ideology becomes very clear. The prison guard Chen helps not only Tao but also Zhang Yuan to reach their terminal destination of home/mainstream discourse.

Some will probably argue that this character should not be simply categorised as a political being, because her existence in the narrative is reasonable though not necessary. Admittedly, as a prison guard, it is not farfetched for Chen to appear on Tao's way home. However, Zhang Yuan's portrayal of her seems to deviate from the **realistic** spirit which he insisted on in his earlier family ethnic films like *Mama* and *Sons*. As Hao Jian puts it: "in this film, some narratives presenting the leitmotif ideology have actually invaded the description of individuals' real living space"⁵⁵, some portrayals of Chen carry more strength in thematic expression than in storytelling. For example, when Tao arrives home, the father comes to open the door. After he twists the key, Chen opens the door (Figure 7-4-1). Thus, "to open the door of the home", which is a symbolically crucial action to Tao, is eventually completed by the prison guard Chen instead of the parents or Tao herself. Nevertheless, after Tao and Chen enter the room, instead of portraying Tao's ambivalence at that moment, the

⁵⁵ Hao Jian, "Study on the Movies of the Sixth Generation: The Dearth in the Generation Naming Ceremony and the Life of Discourse in the Squeezed Way" *Shanhua* 3 (2005), accessed Nov. 22, 2005, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-05-08/ba1545098.shtml>. My Engliash translation. Chinese original: 可这部作品出现了重大的以主题侵害故事、以主旋律意念侵入私人生活空间的叙述。

camera lens focuses on Chen's face, without any reason (Figure 7-4-2). Either from the aspect of the narrative or the mental rhythm, this is an illogical and unreasonable cut. In terms of the theme of homecoming, the narrative should emphasise the complicated emotion of family members after Tao arrives home. However, the director arranges for Chen to interfere into the family issues and persuade the parents to reaccept Tao. Furthermore, the film does not conclude with a scene of home and family, but with a series of shots depicting how Chen eventually leaves Tao's home after witnessing the family reunion. Hao Jian argues that this arrangement is motivated by obvious political reasons: "If the prison guard leaves [when Tao arrives home] as normal, the rest of the film will fall back on the communication and emotional changes of Tao and her parents. Then the film's ending will focus on individuals' lives and emotions but not the state institution's positive function."⁵⁶ In short, it is undeniable that Zhang shifts the focus from Tao to Chen as a kind of compliment to and consideration of the state institute.



Figure 7-4-1

⁵⁶ Ibid. Chinese original:

如果女管教送到门口就按照人之常情走了，影片的主角就要往陶兰身上偏，女管教干部的正面和光明作用就不那么明显，影片结尾的暖色就不在国家机构上而落到了普通人的私人生活中，落到了陶兰和自家人的感情变化和交流上。



Figure 7-4-2

Through analysing the filmic depiction of Chen in *Seventeen Years*, it is not difficult to detect Zhang Yuan's inclination to the mainstream discourse. In this respect, this film is not only an allegory, but rather a statement of "returning home" for him. The gender of the protagonists in Zhang Yuan's films has changed since this film which represents a watershed moment in the director's career. All his earlier works before *Seventeen Years*, namely, *Mama*, *Beijing Bastards*, *Sons*, and *East Palace*, *West Palace*, are narrated with male leading roles. Afterwards, by contrast, he shows a preference for narratives with female protagonists, in *I Love You*, *Green Tea* and *Jiang Jie* (江姐, 2003). Coincidentally or not, after returning home, Zhang Yuan's films turn from "son's story" to "daughter's story". The leading role in his latest film *Little Red Flowers* is a four-year-old boy who is not quite a gendered being yet. Meanwhile, instead of addressing marginalised and controversial themes such as rock 'n roll and homosexuality, he converts to making popular genres such as romance and suspense. I cannot help imagining this image: in the sound of victory bugles for entering the mainstream film industry, a rebellious son Zhang Yuan fades out, and at the same time, a docile daughter Zhang Yuan fades in.

7.4.3 From an intellectual to a secularist

Compared with the filmmakers from the early generations, the post-fifth generation is facing a more complex Chinese film industry. On the one hand, the censorship remains decisive in judging the “legality” or “illegality” of a film. Thus, directors need to remain alert to retain political “correctness” and “security” in their filmmaking. On the other hand, with the development of a socialist market economy in China, the state fund does not play an essential role in filmmaking finance any more. Since the early 1990s, the state-run film studios have gradually lost their active production capability and have become an empty shell selling the “institutional brand”. Filmmaking in China is simultaneously required to embody more entertainment/commercial attributes while remaining a political propaganda tool. Nowadays, the Chinese filmmakers need to cope with the film bureau and the market at the same time. Thus, neither the “box-office poison” (票房毒药, Piaofang duyao) like *King of the Children* (孩子王, Haiziwang, dir. Chen Kaige, 1988) and *Evening Bell* (晚钟, Wanzhong, dir. Wu Ziniu, 吴子牛, 1989) (even though it embodies profound artistic exploration and pursuits)⁵⁷, nor the leitmotif films (though they might receive financial support from the government), are able to survive in the mainstream film industry today. The directors, in addition to being docile in the political sphere, also need to cater for the general populace’s aesthetic requirements to enter the mainstream film industry in the 21st century. Therefore, quite a few directors, be they marginalised, or avant-garde, or elegant, or radical, in Xu Ying’s words,

⁵⁷ The early films of the Fifth Generation like these two films were often “faulted for their obsession with modernist aesthetics at the expense of the box-office”. Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology”, 12. *King of the Children* had only sold six copies and *Evening Bell* even only one in mainland China. Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema* (Beijing: China Forecast and Television Publication, 2008), 244, 273.

“cannot wait to become secularist”⁵⁸. Zhang Yuan is one of these directors. The cinematic presentations in all his earlier works are slow, dark and unintelligible. By contrast, his later films like *I love You*, *Green Tea* and *Little Red Flowers* focus much more on telling stories and depicting dramatic conflicts. It is undeniable that his later works are closer to the mass audience’s aesthetic temperament and interests. In this respect, *Seventeen Years* is a transitional film for Zhang Yuan in its narrative and visual style.

Putting aside the content which aims to compliment certain government institutes, Zhang Yuan continues his earlier film style in *Seventeen Years* in other respects. Similar to *Mama* and *Sons*, this film also shows his consideration for the issues of family ethics and discipline. Furthermore, in both the art design, which includes scenes, props and costumes, and the actors’ performance, Zhang Yuan persists in an unvarnished realist style in this film, as he did in his earlier works. Whether from a thematic or stylistic approach, Zhang Yuan does not present an explicit pursuit of entertainment or commercialisation in this film. Nevertheless, he is rather more sensitive to the feelings of the common audience than before. First, the storyline in *Seventeen Years* is simple and concentrated. There are only five characters in the narrative, namely, the parents, two step-daughters and the female prison guard Chen, and their relationships with each other are apparent. Several scenes at the beginning establish the focal point of conflicts in this blended-family which are generated by the parents’ preference of their own child, until Tao commits manslaughter of her step-sister and thus ending the first part of the story. After a subtitle “seventeen years later”, the camera turns to follow Tao’s way home with the

⁵⁸ Xu Ying. “Self-entertainment in Returning to Main Stream: about Trends of Zhang Yuan’s Creation (回归主流中的自我消隐：张元创作走向探析)”, *Journal of Nanjing Art Institute (Music & Performance)* 1 (2005): 76. 迫不及待地世俗起来。

help of Chen. Presented with few characters and a single storyline, in contrast to films like *Beijing Bastards* which contain numerous characters and multiple storylines, the plot of *Seventeen Years* is easy for the audience to follow. Second, Zhang Yuan employs a strictly linear narrative in this film. Avoiding the “artistic” filmic narrative techniques that he frequently used in *Beijing Bastards* and *East Palace, West Palace*, such as flash back, jump cutting, parallel montage and expressive montage, Zhang Yuan manoeuvres the camera to narrate the plot in a chronological and logical sequence. Undoubtedly, the narrative of *Seventeen Years* is much more legible than those of his earlier works. Some might mention that *Mama* and *Sons* share the same features as those mentioned above. This leads to my third argument on this issue, that is, the changes of narrative rhythm in Zhang Yuan’s films. In *Mama* and *Sons*, Zhang Yuan insists on quasi-documentary visual presentation so that the plots develop slowly, and this probably impairs the common movie-goers’ pleasure and attention in appreciating the films. By contrast, in *Seventeen Years*, the narrative always focuses on the storyline and the main conflicts. Moreover, despite being committed to a realistic narrative style, Zhang Yuan employs professional actors in this film instead of unprofessional actors as in *Mama*, *Beijing Bastards* and *Sons*. Admittedly, in spite of the fact that those instinctive actors might present the “reality” better, their unpolished and raw performances do not suit the common audience’s aesthetic habits. Therefore, the professional actors’ performances are easier for the mass audience to appreciate.

All in all, through adopting a simple story, linear narrative, fluent rhythm and smooth performance, Zhang Yuan presents a more “normal” film to the general movie-goers. What is more, from a discursive approach, this represents a change of his cultural standpoint. What Zhang Yuan abandons in *Seventeen Years* is rather his

posture of cultural elitism than his filmic style. Therefore, although *Seventeen Years* is not an entertaining film, its story and narrative embody Zhang Yuan's discursive conversion from the intellectual/marginalised to the secularist/mainstream. Since then he has hastened his march towards secularism in his filmmaking career. Besides conceiving of entertaining elements such as pretty women, cute children, romance, and suspense, he has also started to employ film stars, since *I Love You*. Later, he totally embraces the star system in *Green Tea*, which contains not only a cast consisting of popular stars Zhao Wei (赵薇) and Jiang Wen, but also a star production crew including scriptwriter Wang Shuo who is a cultural icon in mainland China who rose to prominence in the 1980s, and the director of photography Christopher Doyle (杜可风) who acquired a reputation through his cooperation with director Wong Kar-wai.

Analysing the theme, story, narrative and filmic presentation of *Seventeen Years*, I have demonstrated how Zhang Yuan “returns home” through making and distributing this film. Acting as a docile daughter in the political discourse and a secularist in the cultural discourse, the “independent” director Zhang Yuan eventually sounds the fanfare of returning home.

7.5 Independent or Not: It Is Still an Identity Issue

To be an independent filmmaker or not was much more than a question of film production in 1990s China. To the post-fifth-generation filmmakers, in Dai Jinhua's words, the role of “independent filmmaker” acquired specified meanings and clear

pros and cons; it became a role worthy of imitating and performing.⁵⁹ Therefore, their “returning home” is not only a journey from the marginalised production environment to the mainstream film industry, but also an alteration of their own identities. Identity, according to Stuart Hall, is a role which can be performed to decide one’s discursive stance. Therefore, a director’s choice of film presentation style is not simply launched by his personal preference. It is rather a performance of their cultural posture.

Coincidentally or not, both Lou and Zhang speak from a **daughter’s** discourse instead of a **son’s** discourse in their transitional works. Therefore, in terms of political discourse, they both perform docile gestures – as neither patricidal/resistant sons nor nation’s sons/heroes. As discussed in 7.4.2, Zhang Yuan for the first time constructs a film narrative with a female protagonist in *Seventeen Years*. Meanwhile, Lou moves the narrative emphasis from Situ, who is the leading role in the original novel, to the female character Cynthia.⁶⁰ Thus, they force the narrative to focus on the women, in order to minimise the political discourse when they are on the way “home”. However, they adopt different cultural discourses in these two films. That is to say, they identify with different cultural identities – Lou insists on being an elite whilst Zhang converts to being a secularist. As a director taking up filmmaking in China around a decade ago, Lou Ye cannot be totally ignorant of the market rules. On the contrary, as mentioned in 7.3.2, he is very clear that the audience holding conventional expectations of films (to a great extent, it includes most general audiences) will not appreciate *Purple Butterfly*. On the other hand, he has actually incorporated some commercialised elements into this film. Therefore, what he will retain is not his personal film style which is opposite to the conventional film-watching pleasure, but, rather, a cultural

⁵⁹ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 91.

⁶⁰ According to Lou, the leading role in the original novel is Situ, the male character acted by Liu Ye. In his own words, “the original title of the novel is *The Innocent*, referring to a man being involved into an event totally against his will.” Cheng Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn’t Lie*, 264.

gesture and a discursive position. And this cultural gesture and discursive position is determined by his self-identification. Lou's self-identification embodied in *Purple Butterfly* contains such a self-contradiction: on the one hand, he assumes a humble posture to conform to the mainstream ideology in the political sphere; on the other hand, he stands firm on his elitist identity as the artist of the avant-garde, and as the sub-cultural presenter through his filmic narrative and visual presentation. To a great extent, his awkward self-identification composes this awkward film and eventually leads to its double failures. By contrast, Zhang Yuan makes compromises with the governmental ideology and cultural discourse at the same time. *Seventeen Years* embodies a consistent discursive stance because the director is very clear about the identity he is performing. Nevertheless, whether as an independent filmmaker or a mainstream one, Zhang Yuan always shows his instinct for striking the right note in his identity performance. As Michel Frudon argues, Zhang Yuan became a kind of **role** after making *Mama*.⁶¹ In the early 1990s, he travelled around various international festivals as a reluctant "bastard" (within Chinese mainstream ideology) with *Beijing Bastards*. Seven years later, he stepped into mainstream film industry with a docile and secularist gesture. Furthermore, whether making films within or outside the censorship, as Frudon further indicates, Zhang Yuan has had to perform a role, construct a role, and, also, benefit from this role.⁶² And he himself has been flexible enough to convert his cultural identity because he identifies the artist as being the subaltern, not the elite. In an interview, he expresses his understanding of the artist thus:

A film, an artwork, can hardly change anyone's thought or shake any social structure. At most, it can make you sweat a little like a sauna. ... And we [artists]

⁶¹ Quoted from Xu, Ying, "Self-entertainment in Returning to Main Stream", 77.

⁶² Ibid., 78.

are very much like the disabled, both belonging to a weak group.⁶³

In conclusion, the analyses of *Purple Butterfly*'s failure and *Seventeen Years*' success in this chapter illustrate that the directors' self-identification dictates the cultural stances and discursive standpoints from which they "speak". To speak, a director needs to construct a proper cultural identity in a certain cultural context and for a certain market/audience group. Therefore, the choice of whether to be independent or mainstream filmmakers, in a certain sense, is the choice of a role from which they can benefit, or are able to speak, in a certain historical, political and cultural context. From this perspective, whether for the directors, critics, or for the mass audience, the label of "independent production" is a kind of a sign – an ambiguous, empty signifier without or with little concise signified; we might also say that it is a **myth** – a myth of independence during the period of political and economic transformation. By the same token, when this label/role cannot suit the new context, the filmmakers need to transit to another one. At the 2004 Shanghai Biennale⁶⁴ titled "Techniques of the Visible", some representative independent directors, such as Wang Xiaoshuai, Jia Zhangke, Liu Bingjian and He Jianjun, were invited to participate. However, none of them eventually showed up.⁶⁵ Maybe, stepping into the new century, none of them expected to be named as independent, avant-garde, or marginalised artists any longer.

⁶³ Cheng, Qingsong & Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, 118-119. 因为电影、艺术这种东西，它不会改变任何人的思想，它也不会改变任何的社会结构。说到头了，它最多就是一桑拿——让你出点汗……我们和残疾人一样，都属于没有多大力量、势力薄弱的群体。

⁶⁴ The Shanghai Biennale is the highest-profile contemporary art event in the city and the most established art biennale in China. Aside from its main museum show at Shanghai Art Museum, it also includes talks, lectures and installations in various venues throughout the city.

⁶⁵ Xu Yin mentioned this fact in her essay. Xu, Ying, "Self-entertainment in Returning to Main Stream", 76.

The analyses of *Purple Butterfly* and *Seventeen Years* in this chapter provide the answers to the following questions: How do the post-fifth-generation directors Lou Ye and Zhang Yuan endeavour to “return home” through their transitional films? Why do their endeavours receive different responses and bring them different futures in their filmmaking careers? What are the essential reasons behind Lou’s failure and Zhang’s success in this adaptation of their identifies?

From a political perspective, both *Purple Butterfly* and *Seventeen Years* embody the directors’ attempts to accommodate to censorship. First, they both address topics which are regarded as “significant” by the government, that is, the War of Resistance Against Japanese in *Purple Butterfly* and the judicial system in *Seventeen Years*. More importantly, they both adopt a “safe” and “correct” standpoint when presenting these topics. Though Lou does not proclaim patriotism in a huge way, the implicit depiction of Japanese invaders’ condemned position and the resistance group’s righteous position is undoubtedly part of the story. And, eventually, the female protagonist Cynthia devotes herself to national interest instead of personal love. Zhang Yuan behaves “better” on this issue. To compliment the Chinese Ministry of Justice – the supervisor and sponsor of the film – his film places emphasis on the female prison guard’s positive image, although this may reduce the audience’s attention to the female protagonist – the prisoner Tao. In short, both films are acceptable to the film bureau as political discourse.

However, these two directors’ subsequent career developments have been very different. Lou Ye went back to independent production, while Zhang Yuan was able to continue filmmaking within the censorship. In other words, Lou has failed but Zhang

succeeded in breaking into the mainstream film industry. Since neither of their transitional films conflict with official ideology, what brings them into distinctly different situations? The answer is, apparently, the market. Despite being produced with twenty million RMB, *Purple Butterfly* was a fiasco at the box-office. By contrast, the small production of *Seventeen Years* was accepted well by both critics and the common audience. After China joined the WTO, the films which existed only as political propaganda tools have gradually faded out. Instead, films have become a kind of cultural commodity in the market economy. Thus, these two directors' developments in filmmaking are determined by the market, or, more specifically, by the mass audience's response to their films. As discussed in 4.3.2 and 4.4.3, two key reasons that lead to the different accessibility of *Purple Butterfly* and *Seventeen Years* are the filmic narrative and of presentation style. Not only the general audience members but also some film critics and theorists comment that the excessive cinematic-ness presented in *Purple Butterfly* seriously baffles the general movie-goers' understanding. By contrast, Zhang Yuan employs a smooth and intelligible filmic narrative in *Seventeen Years*. Thus, from a marketing aspect, Lou's failure and Zhang's success in mainstream film industry can be attributed to their film style which satisfies the market's demand or not.

However, Lou was very clear that the narrative and visual presentation style of *Purple Butterfly* would not be well accepted by Chinese mass audience. He deliberately employed unpopular film language when telling a popular story. More specifically, he could not help displaying his elitist cultural posture while adopting a docile discourse in the ideological sphere. In this manner, the reason of this film's failure is more the director's contradictory identification than the film presentation itself. As a director, he desired to be acknowledged by mainstream discourse; however,

at the same time, he stated his elite identity in his filmic representation. It is his own awkward identification that results in the awkward situation of *Purple Butterfly*. On the contrary, Zhang embraces the mainstream ideology and culture more thoroughly in *Seventeen Years*. After benefitting from playing the role of an independent pioneer for years, he successfully re-constructs his identity as a mainstream director, the name that brings him more benefit in the 21st century.

Therefore, to the Chinese post-fifth-generation filmmakers, to be independent or not is not an issue about freedom or independence itself, but rather an identity performance that they can benefit from.

Chapter 8

Discourse of the Weak Son's Generation:

Women's Floating Love Life during Transitional Times

This chapter will focus on the films which tell stories stretching over about ten years of women characters' lives and loves, from an adolescent girlhood to mature womanhood. Meanwhile, all these women's love stories occurred during the recently transitional times of Chinese society. "Transitional times" here refers to a period during which China witnessed tremendous and rapid changes in the areas of politics, economy and culture, specifically, from the end of Cultural Revolution to the end of 1980s, and from the end of 1980s to the early 2000s. The three films to be analysed in this chapter all share this similar storyline, namely *Teeth of Love* (爱情的牙齿, *Aiqingde yachi*, dir. Zhuang Yuxin, 庄宇新, 2006), *Summer Palace* and *My Sister's Dictionary*. *My Sister's Dictionary* is a derivative product of a TV series, *Face Slaps Like Thunder* (耳光响亮, *Erguang xiangliang*, adapted from the novel with the same title by Dongxi, 东西). Its production procedure was thus different from all other films in this thesis. Therefore, while *Summer Palace* and *Teeth of Love* will be analysed closely in this chapter during my argument about the discourse of the weak son's generation, *My Sister's Dictionary* will only be referred to occasionally for comparison.

The directors to be analysed in this chapter have taken different paths in their filmmaking. Lou Ye is well-known both domestically and overseas, and has proven

controversial in his dealing with issues of sexuality, gender, obsession and politics. Jiang Qinmin is comparatively unknown to the public even though all the films directed by him have been screened in Chinese cinemas. Zhuang Yuxin is a lecturer at the BFA, devoting himself to TV series production. He made his debut in the cinema arena with *Teeth of Love*.

While the directors' backgrounds differ, I find that their films have a number of common characters, beyond their theme of women's love lives and the background of transitional times. First, all the female protagonists are living in a bewildering and disoriented situation, perplexed by their love or the times. Second, when depicting women's love stories, the male post-fifth-generation directors describe women's feelings of their bodies more than the female directors. Third, all the stories are told in a nostalgic mood.

Moreover, the narrators in *Summer Palace* and *Teeth of Love* are not consistent or certain. The story-lines are seemingly narrated by the female protagonists. However, an examination of the cinematography of the films indicates that the points of view sometimes belong to the male characters. Like playing hide and seek, the male directors eventually leave some trails as narrators in their filmic narratives. In 8.2, I will demonstrate how their viewpoints appear in narratives as narrative subjects through analysing the shots and montages in these films. Then, in 8.3, I will further probe the reason behind their failure in this "hide and seek" game: is it because they cannot identify themselves with the female protagonists in their films, or, the woman's love life is not the real theme in their filmic representation at all? What is more, why do they try to speak in female voices in spite of the fact that they cannot? Nevertheless, through analysing these directors' filmic representations, I find that

when they cannot self-identify with the female protagonists, they prefer to self-identify with a weak and young boy instead of a mature man whose age is more accessible to theirs. It seems that they dislike playing the role of the male protagonist, even males who are not potential sexual counterparts of the female protagonists in the filmic narrative of woman's love story. In 8.4 I will probe the discourse they adopt in their filmic representation and their own identification. In her essay "Severed Bridge: The Art of the Son's Generation"¹, Dai Jinhua has already portrayed the "son's discourse" of the Fifth Generation when analysing their early works, I will compare the "son's discourse" of the post-fifth generation with that of the Fifth Generation. I will illustrate how the male post-fifth-generation filmmakers identify themselves in historical narratives through this comparison.

8.1 Synopsis of the Selected Films

Summer Palace is the fifth feature film by director Lou Ye and was released in 2006. The film was a Chinese-French collaboration produced by Dream Factory, Laurel Films, Fantasy Pictures and Sylvain Bursztejn's Rosem Films. It was made in association with French Ministry of Culture and Communication (France's Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères) and National Centre of Cinematography and the Moving Image (Centre National de la Cinématographie). It is the first film from mainland China to display full-frontal adult male and female nudity. The explicit sex scenes and political

¹ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 13-48.

undertones in the film make it a touchstone for controversy in China, bringing both the director and his producers into conflict with SARFT. After its screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 without government approval², it was banned in Mainland China, and Lou was officially censured and unable to release films for a period of five years.

Summer Palace tells the story of Yu Hong (played by Hao Lei, 郝蕾), a young woman from a border-city called Tumen, who is accepted to the fictional Beiqing University. The film is divided into two parts. The first begins in the late 1980s, as Yu Hong enters the university. Lonely and isolated in the cramped living conditions, Yu Hong eventually befriends another student, Li Ti (Hu Ling, 胡伶), who introduces her to her boyfriend Ruo Gu (Zhang Xianmin, 张献民), and Ruo Gu's friend Zhou Wei (Guo Xiaodong, 郭晓冬). Yu Hong and Zhou Wei embark upon a passionate but volatile love affair. Two events then bring the first half of the film to a close: first, incensed at the jealousy and emotional instability of Yu Hong, Zhou Wei begins an affair with Li Ti, which is accidentally discovered by the university officials; second, a crackdown occurs on the students in Tiananmen Square and on the campus of Beida. During this chaos, Yu Hong decides to drop out of the university and leave Beijing with her ex-boyfriend from Tumen, Xiaojun. The film then fast-forwards several years to 1997. Yu Hong has left Tumen again, first for Shenzhen, and then for Wuhan, while Li Ti and Zhou Wei have moved to Berlin. Yu Hong is unable to forget Zhou Wei, and has loveless affairs with a married man and a mailroom worker. After an abortion, Yu Hong moves to Chongqing and marries there. Meanwhile, Li Ti, Ruo Gu, and Zhou Wei live a quiet life in Berlin. Li Ti and Zhou Wei still occasionally make

²According to Chinese film management system, a film needs to go through the censorship before releasing in China, and get governmental permission before screening at an overseas film festival.

love. Though the three friends appear happy, Li Ti suddenly commits suicide. Zhou Wei returns home to China where he finds a job also in Chongqing. After more than ten years, Zhou Wei and Yu Hong at last reunite in Beidaihe. While they embrace, they ask each other, “what now?” When Yu Hong leaves to buy drinks, Zhou Wei understands that they can never be together.

Teeth of Love marks the debut of director Zhuang Yuxin, who is an associate professor teaching in Literature Department at BFA and has worked as a writer, producer and publisher actively in Chinese TV industry for more than ten years. It took him about ten years to write and direct this film. The film won the Best Directorial Debut (Jury Award) in the 14th Beijing Student Film Festival (2007), and the leading female actor in it, Yan Bingyan (颜丙燕), won the Best Actress in 16th Golden Rooster Awards (2007).

Set in China in the 1970s and 1980s, *Teeth of Love* tells the tale of three painful romances in the life of Qian Yehong (played by Yan Bingyan), from her teenage years to middle age. The film begins with a scene in which Qian Yehong visits a dentist in 1987, and then flashes back to 1977, the year following the end of the Cultural Revolution. At school, Qian leads a gang of girls and behaves like a boy, fighting and bullying classmates. She seems so unaware that she is a girl that when a boy, her classmate He Xuesong (Chi Jia, 迟佳), writes her a love letter, she insults him in public, which leads to violent conflicts between them. This teenage romance ends abruptly and tragically when He Xuedong drowns in an accident. The second phase in the story occurs in 1980 when Qian is a medical intern at a hospital. She falls in love with one of her patients, Meng Han (Li Hongtao, 李洪涛), a married middle-aged man. She offers up her virginity to him and becomes pregnant later. After a secret

abortion, the affair is unveiled because the police find the dead foetus. Qian herself carries all the responsibilities and leaves Meng. In the final phase, Qian settles down through marrying a man, Wei Yingqiu (Li Naiwen, 李乃文), and having a son, though her husband is forced to work in another city. However, when the couple finally lives together, Qian finds that she cannot live with this man. The day before their divorce, her husband leaves her with a cruel souvenir – a tooth which she has been praised. The film ends where it begins. In order to feel the pain of love again and reserve Wei in her memory, Qian asks the dentist to extract one of her healthy teeth without anaesthesia.

8.2 Hide and Seek: Is She the (Only) Narrator?

There is something, that comes suddenly like a wind on a warm summer's evening. It takes you off guard, and leaves you without peace. It follows you like a shadow, and it's impossible to shake. I don't know what it is, so I can only call it love.

– From the diary of Yu Hong³

In line with the poetic words shown in the opening credits (quoted above) and my intuition as a woman and a filmmaker, I speculated that *Summer Palace* is a film addressing a woman's love life and structured by a woman's self-narration, before I really started watching it. It is shown on the screen that the poem is quoted from the diary of a woman, Yu Hong, who is supposed to be the female protagonist of the film. As expected, it is verified soon that Yu Hong is the leading role in the film from the

³ From the opening credits of *Summer Palace*.

very beginning. In most parts of the film, the camera tells the story following Yu Hong's eyes, experiences and feelings. Furthermore, the whole narrative is interlaced with her monologues, which come from her diary recording about fifteen years of her love life, from 1987 to 2001 (according to the subtitles). She is the only character given voiceovers, a technique traditionally used to create the storytelling by a narrator. The camera manoeuvred by Lou adopts an omnipotent viewpoint in most situations. Therefore, from the aspect of camera manipulation, Yu does not assume the role of a storyteller. However, to a certain extent, she functions as a narrator in the film. Although the camera does not narrate from her point of view, Lou actually creates a visual-aural space for her, and only for her, to express her individual feelings and mental world. The following two series of screenshots (Figure 8-2-1 and 8-2-2) are typical portrayals accompanied by Yu's monologues from her diary,

When I fall into the pain of mediocre life, I meet you. You walk into my life and will be my friend forever. It is not difficult because I realised that we are standing at the same side of the world from my first sight of you.⁴

As shown in the stills, the matched visual image does not contain any narrative content, but is filled with images of the woman. When the camera focuses on her during her voice-over, both the visual and the aural spaces are closed up for her only. In other words, she becomes a monologist in such scenes, because the narrative space belongs entirely to her. From this aspect, Yu is the narrator of the film, in spite of the fact that Lou uses her voiceover to express her inner feelings rather than to aid the continuation of the storytelling. The scriptwriter of *Summer Palace* Mei Feng has said

⁴ Lines in the film. 如果不是在一种理想中来考察我的生活，那么生活的平庸将使我痛苦不堪。而在我怀有这种念头的时候，我们碰见了。你走进了我的生活，你是我最永远的朋友。这并不困难，因为一看到你我就知道了，你和我站在世界的同一边。

that the focus of the film is a woman and her imagination, as well as the real world which she is facing⁵. In short, the narrative of *Summer Palace* is constructed by Yu's subjectivity as a first-person narrator.



Figure 8-2-1



Figure 8-2-2

However, this narrative mode is not consistent in the whole film because the narrator is not always present. From the middle part of the film, Yu Hong disappears intermittently in some scenes. She is first absent in the narrative when Zhou Wei and Li Ti have an affair. After depicting the parade in which Yu is involved, the camera ignores Yu but turns to keep following Zhou and Li to the dormitory hand in hand, till their dormitory sex is accidentally discovered by the university officials. We can interpret the depiction of Zhou and Li's affair as a narrative that is supplement to Yu's love story, because their affair, which pushes her to despair over her relationship with

⁵ Mei Feng mentioned the focus of *Summer Palace* when Cui Weiping interviewed him and Lou Ye in Lou's workshop in Beijing on Aug. 27 and 29, 2006. Cui Weiping, "To Unscramble the Film *Summer Palace* (崔卫平访谈娄烨——对于电影《颐和园》的真正解读)", accessed Feb. 2, 2010, <http://www.mtime.com/group/quote/discussion/149946/>. My summary.

Zhou, is actually the reason why Yu decides to drop out of university. This subsequent scene in the male student dormitory portrays the rage, disappointment and desperation of the students due to the crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square (Figure 8-2-3). All the characters in this scene are men. Yu is not there. Furthermore, as Lou and Cui understand her, Yu is not a woman interested in politics but attends the parade on account of her blind passion.⁶ Though she decides to drop out of university after the parade, the reason is not desperation with the Chinese government but her agony with Zhou. Therefore, this scene is not about Yu from either a physical or a spiritual viewpoint.



Figure 8-2-3

In the second half of the film, the narrative structure is loosened up further. After Yu withdraws from university and Zhou departs for Germany, the director uses parallel montage to depict their experiences separately. In more than twenty minutes of sequential shots which depict Zhou and Li's story in Germany, Yu, the narrator, vanishes from the narrative. Even the scriptwriter of the film admitted that "some roles seem to disappear [in the second half of the film] ... For instance, the story line

⁶ Ibid. My summary. Lou: 实际情况是她被热情所驱使。
Cui: 她这个人身上较少以往的那种政治色彩，政治目的并不明确。

is suddenly disconnected in the scenes of Zhou Wei's life in Germany."⁷ It thus embodies an inconsistency of narrative standpoint: Yu functions as narrator in most scenes but the camera leaves her out of narrative intermittently. In those scenes where Yu is absent, the story is narrated from an omnipotent viewpoint. Therefore, the narrative standpoint hovers in and out of the female protagonist's subjectivity. In other words, the director cannot express all he wants from Yu's viewpoint. Nonetheless, the camera manoeuvred by Lou also exposes a chaotic situation of subjectivity. Even in some scenes where Yu is present, the director divulges his "look", or, his subjectivity, through the camera shots. The illustration below (Figure 8-2-4) shows a series of shots of relational editing. The upper still shows the position relation between the male and female characters, and the lower two are their respective close-ups. The close-up of the men is not portrayed from the woman's point of view, because she is in front of, not beside him, according to the relational shot (the upper still). However, the counterpart close-up of the women is the man's point of view shot because the direction of the portrait accords with the man's line of sight. That is to say, Yu, who is originally designed to be the filmic narrator, is not the character who is looking but the one being looked at in this scene. In this manner, the narrative subject in *Summer Palace* is uncertain and not singular. As if playing a game of "hide and seek", the director endeavours to hide a man's/his perspective behind a female image. However, he failed at this game when he left the trace of a man's/his subjectivity in the narrative and the cinematography.

⁷ Ibid. 有些人物好像不见了，比如周伟在德国的时候，整个叙事就好像断了线似的。



Figure 8-2-4

Coincidentally (or not), a similar inconsistency between the narrator and viewpoint of the film also exists in Zhuang Yuxin's *Teeth of Love*. In order to steal the task of narrator from Yu Hong and to replace her narrative with an omnipotent viewpoint, Lou excludes her from the filmic narrative in some scenes. This raises the problem that Yu's intermittent disappearance ruptures the narrative line and disrupts the narrative space to a certain degree. By contrast, Zhuang steps into the self-narrative of Qian Yehong, who functions as the female protagonist and narrator of *Teeth of Love*, by a more inconspicuous and "safer" method. Instead of composing scenes outside the scope of the narrator's experience, Zhuang inserts another narrative viewpoint into Qian's story by stealthily endowing one of the male characters with the power of the gaze through cinematic strategies.

In terms of narrative mode, Zhuang persists in providing a relatively complete and consistent format for Qian's self-narrative throughout the film. The main body of the film consists of three parts, which are, Qian's romances with three different men during ten years. The director tells the story with a smooth flow of shot and sequence

editing. Qian is the only character present in every scene. From the beginning to the end of the film, the camera keeps following her, consolidating her place as the absolute and only protagonist. Furthermore, the director uses segments of “Qian is telling stories” to begin and conclude the film. The film begins with a scene in a clinic where Qian visits a dentist and has the following dialogue:

Qian: “The rain is coming soon.”

Dentist (look out of the window): “Today? I don’t think so.”

Qian: “Believe me. I do better than the observatory. Are you interested in the story of it?”⁸

Then it soon flashes back to ten years ago. Obviously, the subsequent content must be Qian’s narration on the basis of her memory. After the three romances, the film ends where it began. Qian asks the dentist to remove one of her healthy teeth without using anaesthesia. In terms of narrative technique, the director brings the camera back to the clinic, the place where Qian is telling the story. Thus a clear-cut and integrated self-narrative structure comes into being. The female protagonist Qian shoulders the task of the narrator.

However, if Qian can be regarded as the narrator in the filmic narrative, then there are some mistakes in terms of cinema language in this film, more specifically, in the depiction of the first romance. As discussed above, the whole film is Qian’s self-narration, so that all the storylines should have come from her memory, from what she sees and knows. Therefore, Qian should be not only omnipresent but also the narrative subject in the film. Nonetheless, I find through analysing the

⁸ Lines in the film. Chinese original:

钱: “一会儿要下雨了。”

牙医: “这天, 不会吧?”

钱: “错不了, 我比气象台准。想知道是怎么回事吗?”

cinematography that Qian is converted from the narrative subject to the object by the camera lens in some scenes. This conversion occurs only in the segment which describes the implicit puppy love between Qian and her classmate He Xuesong (hereafter Xuesong, because his surname “He” is easily to be confused with the English word “he”).

In this segment, the director has described Xuesong stalking Qian three times. The first time (Figure 8-2-5) is when the boy waits at an intersection which Qian usually passes on the way to school, concealing himself behind a wall, to watch the girls cycling by. As shown in the figure below, Xuesong works as the leading character of the plot in this scene. Zhuang arranges three shots to portray his action of “looking”, respectively, medium shot, close-up and medium shot again, but only one perspective shot for Qian. Nevertheless, the shot portraying Qian and her clan riding through the avenue is from Xuesong’s point of view. Therefore, the expressive purpose of this sequence of shots is to depict how Xuesong is peeping at Qian.

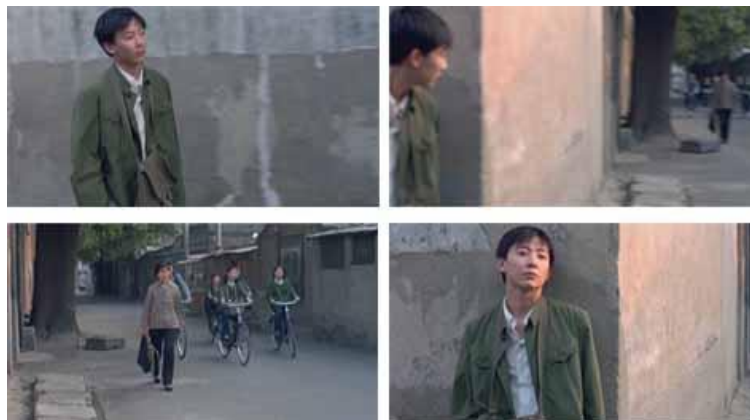


Figure 8-2-5

The second time is when Xuesong asks Qian to meet him outside after school. Unfortunately Qian misunderstands his purpose as being to seek help for a fight, so that she brings her gang along to the rendezvous. Hence, Xuesong does not show

himself but only peeps at her behind a tree (Figure 8-2-6). The director first uses a full shot to explain the position relation between Xuesong and the girls (top left) and then pans the lens to focus on his face (top right). After a shot depicting the girls leaving (bottom left), the frame is cut back to a medium shot of Xuesong. As with the first peep scene, this scene emphasises the boy's looking, because he functions as the active role of the event. In the relation shot, the director brings him to the foreground and pushes the girls to the background. According to the direction of portraits, the frame of Qian and her gang is Xuesong's point of view shot. Moreover, the director uses a close-up of him to describe his expression and his complicated emotion of puppy love including hesitation, shyness, and so on. In this manner, Xuesong is the surrogate of the camera lens. Conversely, the role of Qian – the narrator, who should lead the development of the plots – is rendered passive in the narrative. In both scenes discussed above, Qian is the character being looked at, trailed and secretly admired. What is more, Xuesong occupies the place of the leading role more obviously in the following scene in which he trails Qian on her way home. The director uses a string of shots to depict how he rushes through the hutongs to steal a glimpse of his dream girl (Figure 8-2-7). In respect of cinematography, Qian is absent from the narrative space until she appears within the sight of Xuesong. By analysing the shots and editing in these three scenes, we verify that the story is occurring “behind” Qian's back. If so, it embodies a logical error that Qian cannot tell any story that occurs out of her cognition if she is the only narrator throughout the film. The explanation is that Xuesong replaces her as the narrative subject, because the camera lens identifies with him from the aspects of viewpoint and emotion. The director thus divulges his male point of view in the camera shots and montage.



Figure 8-2-6



Figure 8-2-7

In these ways, both Lou and Zhuang fail to hide their subjectivities behind women's images or pretend to "speak" within women's self-narration in their filmic narratives. This raises the following questions. First, what do they want to present behind the story of a woman's love life? Second, why can they not simulate female narratives? Last but not the least, why do they choose to disguise themselves with female masks when they "speak" through filmic representation? I will discuss these issues in the rest of this chapter.

8.3 Woman, Romance, or History?

In *Summer Palace* and *Teeth of Love*, both directors try to establish a woman's self-narrative mode but cannot sustain it throughout the film. So, do they aim to create this confusion as an element in their filmic style, or do they just make mistakes inadvertently? In my opinion, the confusion is not part of the directors' intention. In terms of narrative methods, both films adopt a typical narration to present the events in the order which they occur within a logical plot, so that the audience can follow it effortlessly. In terms of mise-en-scene, all the costume designs, sceneries, properties and characters are set up to convey a realistic world. Therefore, I do not think that they intend to confuse narrative subjects in these two films, rather they make grammatical mistakes in their use of film language. However, it seems preposterous for directors like Lou and Zhuang to make such technical mistakes, because they should be very skilful in manoeuvring camera and montage, given their previous experience and education background in filmmaking. Lou was educated in film directing at BFA, which is claimed to be "the cradle of Chinese directors", and was already a seasoned director when he made *Summer Palace*, his fifth film. Zhuang is an associate professor teaching at BFA and a veteran in TV series production, who has served in the TV industry for more than ten years. Thus, although *Teeth of Love* was his film debut, he was not inexperienced in cinematic visual presentation at the time he made it. As Peter Rist said in the interview with Zhuang on the occasion of *Teeth of Love* being shown in the First Competition of the World Film Festival in Montreal: "the film seems to be very experienced in terms of directing and acting".⁹ Then, why have these senior filmmakers made technical errors in their filmic narratives? What

⁹ Peter Rist, "A Conversation with Zhuang Yuxin". The session was held in the office of the Chair at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University in September, 2007. The translation was conducted by BFA film production student Aonan Yang and MFA film production student Xun Yu. Accessed Jan. 25, 2010, http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/pages/essays/zhuang_yuxin1/.

triggered them to eventually expose their own viewpoints and subjectivities which should be hidden, according to their original idea?

Zhuang confesses that *Teeth of Love* is a film presented from a male standpoint in his essay “*The Teeth of Love, Self Deconstruction*”¹⁰:

Of course, Zhuang can be considered honest since he admitted that this is a film for men gazing at women. Unlike those directors who claim to be feminist when they are making films for the male preference and male demand.¹¹

Nevertheless, he explained more precisely at a press conference that the film portrays a Beijing woman from a Shanghai man’s point of view. He spoke out candidly that as a second generation immigrant in Beijing from Shanghai, he was surrounded by Beijing women like Qian Yehong when he was young. With fear and curiosity, he enjoyed observing them. Such memories were the original impulsion for him to make *Teeth of Love*.¹²

Through analysing the role of Xuesong, I discover several similarities between this character and the director. First, compared to Qian’s “bravery” and pugnacity, the boy Xuesong is gentle, even feminine. From this aspect, he actually represents a typical image of Shanghai men, who are famous for their gentleness and femininity, in spite of the fact that this was not declared in the film. Second, the romance between Xuesong and Qian happened during their teens. This corresponds to Zhuang’s age in

¹⁰ Zhuang, Yuxin, “*The Teeth of Love, Self Deconstructed*”, *Journal of Beijing Film Academy* 3 (2007): 50-53, accessed Feb. 2, 2010, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c7cdf2f010009nt.html.

¹¹ Zhuang Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”. In this essay, Zhuang analyses his own film in a critics tone using the third person for himself. 当然，他还算老实，总是提前承认这是一部男人看女人的电影，而没有象有些导演那样，明明拍着再男性不过的电影，却标榜自己是女性主义者。

¹² Web article, “The Director of *The Teeth of Love*: This is a film about Beijing Woman in Shanghai Man’s eyes (《爱情的牙齿》导演：这是一部上海男人看北京女人之作)”, accessed Jan. 25, 2010, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c7cdf2f01000a9e.html.

the memory he mentioned. Then his technical mistakes in, and only in, the first part of the film are explainable: to some extent, the director projects his gaze, feeling and emotion into the character of Xuesong. In other words, he identifies himself with Xuesong, and then associates the camera lens with his eyes. Zhuang admits frankly that as a man, he cannot identify with, or project himself into the female protagonist:

After all, Zhuang is not so empty-headed to believe that a male can speak from a female standpoint after being educated with theories of modernism, or so vainglorious to use the label of “feminist”.¹³

Despite the fact that Lou has not self-deconstructed the film *Summer Palace* as Zhuang did, a sense of alienation from the female character leaks through not only in his filmic narrative but also in his own words. In the interview with Cui Weiping, he judges the female protagonist Yu Hong by saying “Women of this kind [like Yu] are created only for filmic ‘gaze’, not for the real life. You can look at her, but you cannot communicate with her.”¹⁴ His words can be demonstrated into four layers: 1. the director creates the female protagonist Yu as an artistic image but not a real woman; 2. the director himself does not admire women like Yu; 3. the director does not even understand Yu because he said that he cannot communicate with her; 4. the director is unable to identify himself with the role of Yu, who is not real, lovable, rational or understandable in his mind.

From this perspective, we can understand how these two experienced directors can produce confusion and contradiction in their film language with respect to the

¹³ Zhuang Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”. 毕竟受过现代理论教育的庄宇新没有无知到认为男性真的可以寻找到在女性立场上发言的感觉，或者虚荣到把女性主义当作最新式样的一顶华丽桂冠。

¹⁴ Cui Weiping, “To Unscramble the Film *Summer Palace*”. 这种女人是只能在电影上看的，是不能用的，是可以观看的，但不能直接跟她交流。

narrative subject. The chief reason is their apparent difficulty in narrating from the standpoint of a character with whom they cannot identify. Hence, their technical mistakes are hardly avoidable. What is more, they cannot help inserting another narrative standpoint into the female self-narrative, because their ultimate aim in their filmic presentation is larger than a woman's private love life. As a Chinese idiom puts it: the intention of the drunkard lies not with the wine, but with other purposes (醉翁之意不在酒, Zuiwengzhiyi buzaijiu). Then what do they intend to represent through women's romances? It is **history**, as Zhuang says in his "Self Deconstruction",

Setting ten years of vicissitudes in China as the temporal background, the director cannot conceal the ambition of a **historical narrative** in this film. He refrains from making an evil or good political judgement of that era [1977-1987], in order to avoid the issue of the oppression from the power to the individual. He develops the storylines in typical narration, caballing to re-write the **history**.

15

Although Lou has not stated it, his intention in the historical and political narrative of *Summer Palace* is more evident. It was categorised within "art films mixed with politics" in the introduction to the 59th Cannes (2006) Film Festival by *New York Times*, which states:

Sex and politics are on full boil in Lou Ye's *Summer Palace*, an engrossing, estimably ambitious epic about the generation of Chinese students who came of age brutally in 1989 when army tanks took aim at protesters agitating for democratic reforms. Lou Ye ... pins his story on the slim, lovely shoulders of Yu

¹⁵ Zhuang Yuxin, "Self Deconstructed". My emphasis. 在漫长的变迁中这部电影无法掩饰对历史的野心，它不屑于对那个年代做或邪恶或美好的政治结论，是在回避并抽空人被权力关系所制约的那个维度，它狡猾地仍以大跨度的顺叙式展开，目的或者说阴谋其实在于重写历史。

Hong, a young student whose sentimental education mirrors that of her fast-changing country.¹⁶

In spite of the fact that western media and critics habitually impose a political reading of Chinese films, I agree that Lou indeed endeavours to encode a historical and political narrative in *Summer Palace*.

First of all, Lou designs a significant temporal background for the film, from 1987 to 2001. Zhang Xudong indicates that an extraordinary tide of cultural discussion in China commonly referred to as the “Cultural Fever” (文化热, Wenhua re) was popular between early 1985 and the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989.¹⁷ He describes this:

All over the country, from big-name professors to high school students, from government officials to interested workers and soldiers, individuals stepped forward to offer information and opinion; seminars, research groups, and reading circles mushroomed in Beijing and Shanghai as well as in provincial towns; eventually, a dazzling flood of publications, speeches, exhibitions, official and unofficial, inundated a tirelessly enthusiastic public.¹⁸

The first half of the film starts exactly at the peak of this Chinese “Cultural Fever” and ends at the eve of the crackdown on the student movement in Tiananmen Square. The second half of the story takes place from 1989 to the beginning of the new century, the period when China experienced upheavals in terms of economic structure

¹⁶ Manohla Adargis, “At Cannes, Foreign Art Films Mix with Politics,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2006, accessed Feb. 15, 2010,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/19/movies/19cann.html?pagewanted=print>.

¹⁷ Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁸ Ibid.

and value cognition. During the early 1990s, the Chinese government accelerates the transition of its economic mode from planned economy to market economy. Many people lost their “iron bowls” (铁饭碗, Tiefanwan)¹⁹ which were expected to be their lifetime occupation, and most graduates could not obtain a job with the government like the previous generations. To a certain extent, the changes in the economy, politics and cultural status quo from 1987 to 2001 are another theme implied in this film, besides the explicit one of Yu Hong’s love life. Nevertheless, unlike what Zhuang did in *Teeth of Love* which “deliberately obviates depicting the obvious epochal signs like the portraits of Mao Zedong and his quotation chant,”²⁰ Lou highlights historical events in *Summer Palace*. The student movement and the crackdown are important contents of the film and are set up to be the key turning points of the story. Though he never gave clear indications on the crackdown of the student movement described in the film as the Tiananmen Square Incident, he has actually provided sufficient hints of it. He names the university where Yu studies as Beiqing University, a name that evokes either Peking University or Tsinghua University. Because Peking University and Tsinghua University are pronounced as Beijing daxue and Qinghua daxue respectively in Chinese mainland Romanisation; the name Beiqing daxue seems to be the combination of the names of these two top universities in China, which were the key figures in the Tiananmen Square Incident as well. The characters in the film call it Beida for short, the same as the factual shortened name for Peking University. These are hints designed by the director, and they are too easy to decipher. Thus, Lou tries to pretend he is insinuating the actual event, but ends up highlighting it straightforwardly on the screen. Furthermore, when he uses several segments to flash quickly from 1989

¹⁹ “Iron bowl” is a Chinese slang referring to a very steady occupation in state-run corporations or institutions.

²⁰ Zhuang Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”. 回避主席像，语录歌等过于明显的时代标志符号而不是强调。

to 1997, he interlaces video clips (with explanatory subtitles) of some watersheds in socialist countries alongside with the depictions of Yu and Zhou's lives, as listed followed,

1989, Yu Hong and Xiao Jun leave Beijing for Tumen;

1989, Li Ti and Zhou Wei stay in Beijing to wait for their German visas;

1989, Berlin [collapse of Berlin Wall];

1991, Yu Hong leaves Tumen again for Shenzhen;

1991, Moscow [disintegration of the Soviet Union];

1992, Shenzhen [Deng Xiaoping made his Southern tour]²¹;

1994, with the help of Ruo Gu, Li Ti and Zhou Wei arrive in Berlin;

1995, Yu Hong and her good friend, Wang Bo, from Shenzhen arrive in Wuhan;

1997, Hong Kong [transfer of sovereignty to PRC];²²

Thus, Lou's ambition of telling a historical narrative cannot be concealed, because all these historical events are irrelevant to Yu's love life. Moreover, not only the name of the university, but that of the film is also meaningful. Concerning the title of *Summer Palace*, Lou explains in an interview that "the Summer Palace was a troublesome place in history, and it is still a troublesome name today".²³ He also talks about the Tiananmen Square Incident in the interview, arguing that the Incident is just like a crazy romantic drama that happened between the Chinese people and their government. Furthermore, the crazy love between Yu and Zhou, filled with

²¹ In 1992, Deng Xiaoping made his Southern Tour to reinvigorate the reform process in China. I have also mentioned it in chapter 6.

²² Quoted from the subtitles of the video segments.

²³ Web article, "The Love Story Created by the Revolution: the Most Beautiful Testimony of *Summer Palace* (革命创造出的爱情故事:《颐和园》最美的见证)", accessed Jan. 25, 2010, <http://www.nownews.com/2008/07/22/91-2307865.htm>, 2008/07/22 01:05. 颐和园过去是个麻烦的地方, 现在也还是个麻烦的名字。

bewilderment and betrayal, exactly mirrors a revolutionary time, because love is the best way to release oneself under huge oppression.²⁴ This shows that the love story is not the real theme in this film, but only a ramification of a revolution, or, in other words, a metaphor of the theme of politics and history, just as Lou says, “When the revolution comes, the love-affair comes.”²⁵

Therefore, whether the directors admit or not, their ambition of creating historical narrative, which they try to hide in the stories of the women’s love life, is eventually exposed. Here I come back to sum up the answer to the question of why they eventually fail to hide their subjectivities in a female self-narrative. The first reason is that they cannot simulate a female standpoint and discourse because they cannot identify themselves with her, as I discussed above. The second reason is that they could not bear to exclude themselves from the history narrated in their films. As men, though pretending to speak in women’s voice, they still need to reserve a place for their hidden male ego in the historical narrative.

This is further verified by the time when they insert their subjectivities. Through identifying with Xuesong, Zhuang surrogates his eyes with the camera lens during the first romance of the trio, the time background of which – the end of Cultural Revolution – contains more political and historical signifiers compared with the other two. Pan Ruojian says that Zhuang uses a metaphor to bring out his historical viewpoint in this part (and she does not discuss the same issue in her analyses of the other two romances).²⁶ She argues that Zhuang designs the plots of Xuesong hurting

²⁴ Ibid. 导演表示，六四宛如一场爱情剧，那段历史就像政府与人民谈了一场惊天动地的爱情……他认为男女主角混沌、背叛和疯狂的情爱世界，正印证大革命底下的必然规律，就是在受到外界压力的时候，恋爱或许是一种自我纾解的方式。

²⁵ Ibid. 革命来了，爱情就来了。

²⁶ Pan Ruojian, “Memories and Memories Lost: On the Film *Teeth of Love*”, originally published in *Journal of Beijing Film Academy* 3 (2007): 54-56. Quoted from *2007 Chinese Movies Review*, ed. Zeng

Qian and himself with bricks “to present a panorama of the society in a particular time (i.e. the Cultural Revolution) through depicting the individuals’ experiences of pain.”²⁷ In this way, Zhuang bursts into the narrative of this romance not only for his own nostalgic sentiment but also to participate in the historical narrative. Meanwhile, when does Lou begin to withdraw the camera lens from the female narrator Yu and insert an omnipotent viewpoint? It is exactly the time when he portrays the students’ movement, as argued in 8.2. It seems that the director is indulging himself in a kind of impulsive passion to be part of a surging student parade so that he cannot manoeuvre the camera lens in a sober and rational mood. Simultaneously, the filmic narrator – the woman – vanishes from this historical narrative.

8.4 When I Was Young and Weak ...

Thus, the first two questions listed in the end of 8.2 have been solved. First, both Zhuang and Lou have concealed a historical and political grand narrative within the stories of women’s private love life. Or, borrowing Zhuang’s words, “[the director] cannot transcend the limitations of historical and social status quo”²⁸. In this way, the depiction of history is seemingly inevitable in their films, no matter what kind of story is narrated. Second, neither of these male directors eventually succeeds in simulating female self-narratives, because they cannot resist the temptation to occupy a position (or, rather, a subjective position) in the historical narratives. Now I will discuss the last question, that is, why do they choose women to be the narrators and leading roles in their films, though they find it hard to implement this narrative mode

Yanbin (Guangzhou: Huacheng Publication, 2008), 101-105.

²⁷ Ibid., 102. 以个体的疼痛体验呈现了特殊年代的整体社会图景。

²⁸ Zhuang Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”.

with facility? In other words, why do they try to speak in a woman's voice, in spite of the fact that they have already realised the impossibility of simulating a female standpoint and discourse (according to Zhuang's self-deconstruction mentioned in 8.3)?

In chapter 6, I have argued that the male Chinese post-fifth-generation filmmakers, such as Lou Ye, Wang Quan'an and Guan Hu, prefer to express their fragility and bewilderment through female-subjective narrative. However, though the female protagonists in the films in this chapter are also bewildered, they are no longer the subject of the filmic narrative, but puzzled and puzzling objects. In these partially historical narratives, the post-fifth generation cannot continue disguising themselves as women successfully. So, what are their roles in these filmic narratives? Inspired by Dai Jinhua's term, "the art of the son's generation"²⁹, which is a metaphor of the early films of the Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers, I would argue that the male post-fifth-generation filmmakers are "weak sons". In Dai's research, she indicates that "[t]he struggle of the Fifth Generation was another spiritual flight from a trap (精神突围, Jingshen tuwei), undertaken by the new generation of Sons in the pale light of yet another Young China's dawn."³⁰ She thereby summarises the early works of the Chinese Fifth Generation as the art of the son's generation, because those films collectively embody a spiritual pursuit "to transcend the disjuncture of history and culture"³¹ and "to establish a novel film language, grammar, and set of aesthetic principles"³². In contrast, these films of the post-fifth generation embody a discourse of a different kind of sons who are not eager (and maybe have never considered the

²⁹ Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 13-48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*

possibility) to transcend the father's historical discourse. If we can say that the theme of the early works of the Fifth Generation is "patricide", then the slogan of the male post-fifth generation is that "I am **the Son** who will never ever kill the Father". They are sons, but not Oedipus.

Through analysing the visual presentation and narrative in *The Teeth of Love* and *My Sister's Dictionary*, we find that the directors have compulsive tendencies to identify with male characters who are young and weak. As discussed in 8.2, Qian is converted from the narrative subject to the object in (and only in) the segment describing her puppy love with Xuesong. Nevertheless, the director does not make the same grammatical error in the next two segments which are both composed from Qian's point of view. That is to say, the director only surrogates himself into the role of Xuesong, a teenage boy, but not into two mature men. Zhuang ascribes this to his nostalgia complex. So what did impress him most in his teenage years? It was **fear** and **curiosity**, as he himself says that the impulsion to make this film was his memory of gazing at these strong women with fear and curiosity.³³ Therefore, though now an adult, a lecturer, a mature man, he still likes to speak in the tone of a young and powerless teenage boy in his filmic narrative. The film *My Sister's Dictionary* is a similar case of this. In contrast with Zhuang, the director Jiang has not made the same grammatical mistakes, because he does not set up the female protagonist, but a male character, to be the narrator. However, the male narrator, that is, the character with whom the director identifies himself through the filmic narrative, has several common characteristics with Xuesong. At the very beginning of the film, the absence of **the father** has been stated. Through the neighbour's talking, we learn that Hongmei's father disappeared (Hongmei is the female protagonist of the film). The role of Cuibai,

³³ Web article, "The Director of the *Teeth of Love*".

the youngest brother of Hongmei, works as the eyewitness of her story. The appellation “my sister” in the title of the film is mocking his voice. From this aspect, he is the narrator of the story. Furthermore, he is the only male character who really cares about Hongmei while all the other men act as wretches or cowards. His father disappeared. His elder brother is a “bastard” who helps a rascal to rape the sister. The sister’s boyfriend breaks up with her when she is pregnant because he suspects who the father of the baby is. The swimming coach fancies Hongmei’s beauty at first and marries her when she is low, but eventually abandons her for a woman from a rich and powerful family. In contrast, the little brother Cuibai is the only “man” who is likely to be recognised as good. However, he is weak at the same time. Watching his sister being hurt by men again and again, he has no power to protect her at all. All he can do is give her a paper note written “I wish you happy” with his blood as her wedding gift. Accordingly, the shared characteristics of the roles with whom the directors like to identify themselves are young, pure, kind, but powerless. They sympathise with the female protagonists who are struggling in love and bewilderment and hurt by selfish men. Standing on the side of the suffering women emotionally and spiritually, they are not the men hurting them, but are not their heroes or saviours either.

Both the filmic narratives and manipulation of the camera lens show that the directors design these female protagonists as their sexual objects (at least, the imaginary sexual objects in their memories). The male post-fifth-generation directors concentrate on describing women’s feelings of their bodies more than the female directors do. The nudity and exposed sexual scenes are undoubtedly one of the most attractive and controversial features of *Summer Palace*. The detailed depiction of Qian’s abortion in *Teeth of Love* is impressive as well. Although Jiang Qinqin does not have nude performance, the depictions of sexual content in *My Sister’s Dictionary* are

not implicit (Figure 8-4-1³⁴). Why do they prefer to challenge themselves with this task of simulating the women's bodily feelings, which is impossible for male directors? Putting aside the commercial purpose for the sake of argument, this is not a simulation, but a composition of their imaginary sex. Undoubtedly, these female protagonists are imaginary sexual objects for these weak sons, just as Zhuang admits that he enjoyed "observing" girls like Qian when he was young.³⁵ Jiang works patiently to exhibit Hongmei's beauty repeatedly. When initially portraying Cuibai and Hongmei together in a scene, he decreases the colour saturation of everything in the frame except Hongmei who appears in a colourful dress (Figure 8-4-2). This is exactly the sister in his eyes: so beautiful, so brilliant. Meanwhile, neither the strong Beijing girl (Qian) nor the beautiful elder sister (Hongmei) nor the elusory woman (Yu) is reachable for these male directors – the tender Shanghai boy, the little brother and Lou (as he said, he can gaze but cannot understand a girl like Yu). Thus, through the camera lens, they accomplish their sexual imaginings. However, they cannot be the male counterparts in such imaginary sexual encounters, because to some extent, they are impotent to these women, as they were young and weak "at that time".



Figure 8-4-1

³⁴ Since the original picture captured from the video is very dark, I have adjusted the lightness and contrast to make it clear.

³⁵ Web article, "The Director of the *Teeth of Love*".



Figure 8-4-2

By now we should have the answer to why these male filmmakers prefer hiding themselves behind female narrators but fail eventually. On the one hand, they do not consider themselves as the subjects – the heroes, “the father” or the patricidal son – in the historical discourse. In other words, they are most willing to be the son under the name of “the father”, and to speak within the rules of the father’s discourse. However, as the son generation – the young artists in either Chinese or western politics, history and culture – they must speak out about their discomfort, oppression and must contest remaining within the father’s discourse. Therefore, they design their imaginary sexual objects whose gender/sex is usually considered as the weak, the oppressed, and non-privileged – as their “avatars” to experience the transitional times in China. What is more, through self-identifying with the naive little brother (Cuibai in *My Sister’s Dictionary*) and the teenage tender boy (Xuesong in *Teeth of Love*), they themselves perform the male roles that are even weaker and more powerless compared with the female protagonists – the mature elder sister Hongmei and the tough teddy girl Qian. As depicted by the camera lens, they enjoy either being protected by a woman’s arms (Figure 8-4-3) or gazing at the stronger women with fear and admiration (Figure 8-4-4). They are not the father, the elder brother or the hero who are able to save, protect and possess these women, but only the helpless witnesses and storytellers with tender

hearts imbued with sympathy and sorrow and desirable eyes.



Figure 8-4-3



Figure 8-4-4

On the other hand, these male directors could not reconcile themselves to being entirely excluded from the historical narratives. First, as I argued in 8.3, they have a strong affection for describing the times though not emphasising that as their theme. I have discussed how the subtle explanation of several historical events which are inserted in *Summer Palace* yet no means related to Yu's love stories, reveals Lou's special preference for political and historical narratives. By the same token, Jiang also hints at the specific time frame from the very beginning of *My Sister's Dictionary*. The sixth scene of the film starts with a parade filled with slogans such as "Down the Gang of Four", "Support the Communist Party", and "Never forget class struggles", all of which specify the time as the end of Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, Jiang also devises some lines with particular era features. When Jin Dayin catches Hongmei and her first boyfriend having sex in the hospital, he berates them that "[we will]

denounce you as we do the Gang of Four”³⁶. Such a political discourse used to condemn an affair immediately brings us back to the late 1970s. In a video interview, Jiang says that what impelled him to adapt Dongxi’s novel was precisely their common growing up experience and historical memory in that era.³⁷ Although Zhuang tries to avoid strong time marks, as he claimed,³⁸ the standardised costume of the girls – the green army uniforms and white shirts – has already signalled the temporal background at the beginning of the film. (At least, most Chinese audiences easily discern the dress as being a typical and popular costume for girls during Cultural Revolution, signalled by Mao’s verse that “Most Chinese daughters have a desire strong; To face the powder and not to powder the face.”³⁹) Furthermore, the times in their nostalgic narratives are filled with masculine power fights. Both the stories of *My Sister’s Dictionary* and *Teeth of Love* occur at the end of the Cultural Revolution. The most important political event in *Summer Palace* is the Tiananmen Square Incident. Each was a time for patricide, violence, revolution, and masculinity, but ended with the failure of the son’s generation. These male directors born in the 1960s and growing up in the 1970s cannot help bringing great passion to stories related to these heroic historical events in their memories, because, at the very least, they were there. But the painful truth is that they were merely pathetic bystanders, not participants in these political and historical performances by any means. They stand neither by the father’s generation nor the son’s generation in the conflicts; henceforth their discursive identity is vague. As boys who are still young and powerless, the only

³⁶ Lines of *My Sister’s Dictionary*. English translation is cited from the subtitles of the film. Chinese original: 拿你们和四人帮一块儿批!

³⁷ Quoted from the video interview of Jiang Qinmin about *My Sister’s Dictionary*. 之所以被[小说]感动, 是因为它描述了我们共同的成长经历和历史记忆。

³⁸ Zhuang Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”

³⁹ They are the last two sentences of Mao Zedong’s famous poem “Militia Women: Inscription on a Photograph” (七绝: 为女民兵题照). English translated by Xu Yuanchong. Chinese Original: 中华儿女多奇志, 不爱红妆爱武装。

thing they can do is to witness the filicidal crackdown of the patricidal sons and then tell their stories with sorrow, sympathy and bewilderment. However, they are reluctant to work as outsiders, though they have already realised that they are not the protagonists. They must be **present**. Therefore, there they are, present in the filmic narratives as narrators, witnesses or peepers. What is more, they also try to leave some traces/evidence in the historical narratives, like Xuesong leaving Qian a permanent back pain though he has never possessed her physically (and the other two men who actually have had sexual relationships with Qian have not left her any permanent trauma). When talking about the spiritual impulse for making *My Sister's Dictionary*, Jiang states that “everything related to what our generation experienced – the circumstances, our growing up and our endeavour – is worth understanding and taking note of in the new era.”⁴⁰ Although his words are as pretentious as a political sermon, he indulges himself in an ambition to be partially present in historical discourse.

Thus they are caught in a discursive dilemma generated by their awkward identities in the historical discourse of a transitional time in China. They avoid creating a male role as the hero, whose discourse is hard to simulate for them in the historical and political narratives, because they have never been acknowledged either as “the father” or the patricidal son. Meanwhile, they cannot agree to disappear entirely. Thus, they send their dreaming girls/their imaginary sexual objects/the Other, to experience the tides of the transitional time while identifying themselves with powerless witnesses. Furthermore, through stressing the depiction of sexual contents, they manage to dress a historical narrative with the coat of a romance or erotic story.

⁴⁰ Quoted from the video interview of Jiang Qinmin about *My Sister's Dictionary*. 我们所经历过的环境、成长、遭遇和努力，对新时代来说，是具有了解和参考价值的。

Then, at the very least, they can burst into the narratives as the bearer of the erotic gaze in spite of their impotence towards these women. Therefore, what these male directors actually demonstrate in their filmic narratives is another spiritual flight from a trap⁴¹, that is, a generation of the weak sons breaking through a discursive cage. As Zhuang indicates, “the more this film [*Teeth of Love*] seems to come unprecedentedly close to women and to explore their mental experiences, the more it embodies a performance of the male’s flight from a discursive dilemma”.⁴²

Through analysing the filmic look and narratives of *Summer Palace* and *Teeth of Love*, I find that both Lou and Zhuang have made grammatical mistakes when composing their filmic narratives. Like playing hide and seek, they try to simulate a female self-narrative, but a male perspective – either from an avatar of the director or from an omnipotent perspective – sneaks into the narrative space. This grammatical mistake in film language can be explained with two reasons: the male directors cannot identify themselves with the female protagonists; nor can they avoid inserting their historical and political perspectives while composing female romances. They hence trap themselves into a self-contradiction which I summarised as the dilemma of “to be present or not”.

What is more, through analysing the male images in *Teeth of Love* and *My Sister’s Dictionary* with whom the male directors identify themselves, I ascribe their

⁴¹ I borrow Dai Jinhua’s words. See Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire*, 23.

⁴² Zhuang, Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”. 这部电影越是看似在中国电影中前所未有地贴近女性，挖掘女性的内心体验，越是显露出男性话语讲述的突围表演性质。

dilemma to their paradoxical identities in the contemporary historical discourse. Born in the 1960s, these male directors grew up during the Cultural Revolution – the specific time when the theme is patricide. The father's image is obscure or even absent in all these three films. However, during "the father's" absence, these male directors were too young to perform the role as patricidal sons during the historical events in 1970s. They thus exist in a paradoxical and ignorable position in the historical discourse. However, they still expect to be present in the historical narrative, even though not sharing the leading roles. Therefore, a woman/the Other is created to experience the tides of the times while the director himself (or his point of view) appears in the filmic narrative as a weak and powerless boy/son. Furthermore, the boy has never grown up in the films. At the endings of the films, he is either still young (Cuibai) or dead/disappeared (Xuesong). These are the sons who will never kill or be the father. Therefore, what is embodied in these female romances directed by the male post-fifth-generation filmmakers is precisely the discourse of the weak son's generation, namely, the oppressed, the powerless, and the non-privileged.

Meanwhile, they also choose to speak in the voice of the weak son. First, this is a narrative technique for the directors working in China's contemporary political circumstances. Telling women's love/sexual stories as powerless men, they manage to contrive to create a gender perspective, instead of a historical or political one, as the controversial issue in their films, because they prefer to avoid stating openly their political stand. Telling women's love/sexual stories as powerless men, they also manage to disguise the narrative of a masculine history of outward fight as a feminine one of inward experience. As Zhuang says:

Essentially, the selection of a gender perspective from which the film narrates

[of *Teeth of Love*] is a kind of strategy, which manages to cover a political perspective, evade political critiques, and make an indistinctive depiction of Chinese history during these several decades.⁴³

In this manner, it is a cunning way to survive within the Chinese film censorship system. Nevertheless, these male filmmakers enjoy this identity performance. To some extent, they are more than happy to act in the roles of the weak sons, who are welcomed by both western critics and accepted by the Chinese government. On the one hand, they express no preference, or capability, for making films in the Chinese mainstream film industry, so that “the son” could be a reserved brand name for them to struggle/show off in western film festivals. Acting as the oppressed, the powerless and the non-privileged is their necessary posture. On the other hand, the weak son, unlike the patricidal one, can still survive within the father’s discourse, reserving the dream of being promoted into the father’s generation one day in the hierarchical system. The way Lou behaved in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival is a good example of such identity performances. First, he screened the film *Summer Palace* in the film festival without the Chinese government’s approval. As a result, the Chinese film bureau banned the film from being released in China according to Chinese regulations. Then, in the news conference of 2006 Cannes Film Festival, Lou claimed: “I will delete anything they [the Chinese film bureau] ask to me delete.”⁴⁴ As to the reason for screening the film before getting government permission, he replied as follows:

As a professional director, it is my responsibility [to screen the film at the film

⁴³ Zhuang, Yuxin, “Self Deconstructed”. 对性别视角的选取和讲述在本片中本质上是一种策略，是为了达成对政治视角的回避，及最终对究竟什么是中国这几十年历史演进的政治正确价值的模糊处理。

⁴⁴ Web article, “The news conference of *Summer Palace* for 2006 Cannes Film Festival (《颐和园》戛纳记者会，娄烨携主演亮相)”, accessed Jan. 12, 2010, <http://www.cctv.com/performance/20060519/101172.shtml>. 我愿意删除他们[指电影局]想让我删除的任何东西。

festival]. Until this mission is accomplished, I must be responsible to everyone contributing to this film, including the production crew, the investors, the sponsors, the producers, and the distributors. But, after the screening, I will keep sending it to the Film Bureau until it passes the censor.⁴⁵

Acting as an oppressed son for western discourse and a submissive son for Chinese mainstream discourse at the same time, how perfectly he accomplishes the performance of the identity of the weak son! To be present or not, it is no longer a question.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 作为一个职业导演，我负有责任，这个责任不是我一个人的，是所有参加这部影片制作的、所有投资人，制片人、销售商的，这个责任我必须执行到底。但是放映完成之后，会继续送电影局审查，直到这部电影在中国大陆通过为止。

Conclusion

Rather than addressing the question “Are these films/directors feminist?”, this study of narrative films with female-protagonists seeks the answers to “Why do they (the post-fifth-generation filmmakers in China) choose women to be protagonists?” and “How do they portray women and women’s stories?” If film is a discursive representation as I discussed in 2.1, then what this thesis probes precisely is what kind of discourse these directors try to represent through their filmic narratives with female-protagonists and how they identify themselves within the filmic discourse they construct.

It seems natural and understandable for the female directors to compose filmic narratives from a female perspective. Undeniably, their preference for portraying women and women’s stories is, at the very least, partially due to their own self-consciousness as women. Therefore, to a large degree, their filmic representations about women embody their self-identification of “being a woman”. Through exploring the possibilities of identification between the women directors and their female protagonists, I categorise the women’s stories directed by the female directors into two types: my-story and her-story.¹

Both Ma Liwen and Xu Jinglei tell my-stories in their films with respect to the

¹ See Chapter 5 for the definition and discussion of my-story and her-story .

narrative and visual presentation. The stories are always told from one female character's standpoint, such as Madame-He in *Gone Is the One*, Xiao Ma in *You and Me* and Jiang in *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Meanwhile, the directors and these female characters share the subjective-position of the filmic look. By manipulating the camera, Ma and Xu merge their own perspectives with those of the female characters. They project their personal feelings, emotions and values, as well as their understanding of love and life, onto these female characters. Moreover, they partially identify with them. Due to the exploration and in-depth portrayal of women's feelings, emotions and psychological worlds, critics and mass media often acclaim these films to be "feminist".

Although both directors tell my-stories, the attitudes of Ma and Xu toward spectatorship are very different. Ma thoroughly excludes any erotic gaze in her films. On the one hand, she prevents women's images from being sexual objects for the male voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze by excluding men from her narratives, obscuring male images from her frame, and eliminating male perspectives through cinematographic techniques. On the other hand, while composing a female-centred filmic narrative, she does not construct a female spectatorship for women either. Not only does she deprive men of the position of gazers, she also excludes them from the position of "to be gazed at". Thus, women in her films do not own the gaze either. The absence of men results in a desexualisation of the women on and off the screen. The fact that she tries her best to avoid the male gaze and evicts men from the screen paradoxically serves as a proof of the existence of the male gaze and patriarchal

power. Conversely, Xu creates an aestheticist visual world for the erotic gaze in *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*. As the director and the leading actor, she spares no effort to display the beauty of the female protagonist/herself. Despite being the narrator in the film, she (Jiang/Xu) actually assumes the position of “to be gazed at”, that is, the position of the Other. However, she (Jiang/Xu) is gazing as the Other at the same time. To some extent, she is more than happy to be the Other, because only the Other is able to play the game of seduction. That is how she empowers herself – by being looked at as a sexual being/woman, speaking as the uncertain/woman, performing the weak/woman, and gazing back as the Other.

By contrast, another female, Li Yu prefers to tell her-stories through her filmmaking. Although her films too are narrated from a woman’s point of view, this woman is never a female character in the films but is simply the director, Li Yu, herself. Employing sober and objective narrative style, she never identifies herself with any female roles in her films. Instead, Li gazes at the women she creates on the screen – she gazes at these conventional women lacking in self-consciousness from an assumed superior perspective as a cultural elite and rebellious woman. Moreover, through emphasising the difference between herself and these women, she achieves a symbolic identification for herself.

Although these three female directors tell women’s stories with different filmic styles and perspectives, they all present very “feminine discourses”² in their filmic

² I have explained why I use the phrase “feminine discourse” rather than “female discourse” or “feminist discourse” in this thesis in 1.3.

representations. Compared to the female directors of the older generations, who tried to hide their sex/gender in their filmic representation by avoiding any show of feminine characteristics in themes, narratives and visual styles, these three female directors of the post-fifth generation have no hesitation in displaying, even emphasising femininity in their films. Ma Liwen emphasises women's sentiment by devaluing men's emotion and obscuring men's images. Xu Jinglei emphasises women's beauty as sexual beings and their religious-like need for love by displaying them as the Other. Li Yu emphasises women's rebellion against suppression by a male/dominant discourse. Moreover, all these women's stories are filled with tears. Whether the ending is tragic or happy, women in these films are always hurt, ignored, insulted and used by men. In short, they portray women as the weak and the subaltern. Even in the films in which men are absent, such as Ma's works, the ivory tower Ma built to reject any invasion from the male gaze and masculine discourse precisely highlights women's socio-cultural position of being the weak. Furthermore, these female directors also display their femininity in their own appearance. When they appear in public, they prefer to dress and behave in very womanly ways. They advertise their feminine charm, because they need to identify themselves as "female directors" in which the word "female" does not weaken their power of speaking but actually empowers them.

In conclusion, whether with a pitiful pose or a rebellious one, these female directors present this kind of statement: "We are women. We are making films about women. Both our films and ourselves are very feminine, because we are NOT men."

They empower themselves through posing as women. Through this statement, they obtain the identification as female directors – and now it is not only a description of occupation and gender, it becomes a brand name. Therefore, to be feminist or not is not a spiritual or self-conscious choice to them anymore. In Foucault's approach, it is a discursive choice consciously formulated in discursive formations. Feminist is simply another brand name. So the question is not "Is she a feminist?", rather it is, "Does she pose as a feminist?"

What is interesting is that none of them like to be branded as feminist. Li Yu, as a representative example, even repeatedly denies that she is a feminist, although all of her films glitter with a feminist discourse of resistance and revolution. Cao Qiong reasons that Li's denial is a refusal to be constantly labelled and evaluated, and avoiding a Chinese misreading of feminism.³ I have just proven that these directors like to be labelled as woman. Therefore, what Li refuses is not "labelling as such", but to be labelled as a feminist.

Li explains, "I am not feminist. I like men and enjoy the love relationship with them."⁴ Accordingly, "feminist" in her words refers to the radical feminism of the "second wave". More specifically, what Li denies is the brand name of second wave feminist, who are, as summarised by Sawicki, women demanding rights to "engage in

³ Cao, Qiong, "Analysis of Female Body and Image Space in Li Yu's Movies: Focusing on *Fish and Elephant* and *Dam Street*", a dissertation submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Film Studies (Shanghai: University of Shanghai: 2007), 47. 其一,任何艺术创作者都不希望自己和作品总是面对“命名”和衡量。其二,国内语境中对女性主义的误读。

⁴ Ye Si, "An Interview with Director Li Yu (导演李玉的采访手记)", accessed Jan. 5, 2006, <http://www.douban.com/review/1018806/>.

a desexualisation of their struggles and move away from gender-based identity politics”⁵. The name “feminist” in the sphere of the second wave is not feminine but masculine. However, when the appearance of power tends to be feminine, as Baudrillard argues, such a masculine name does not help to ensure a person the privilege of speaking. Therefore, the female directors abandon the name of feminist but turn to adopt a more feminine name such as women or even belle. Therefore, to the post-fifth-generation female directors, the questions of “Am I a feminist” and “Shall I pose like a feminist” are performances within a discursive formation.

So if the name of “feminist” is considered as a brand name for the female post-fifth-generation directors, can male directors also wear it? Through analysing the male directors’ films with female-protagonists, I have found that their films present a quasi-feminist temperament. These men devote their films to exploring women’s feelings and emotions, to portraying women’s life dilemmas, and to eulogising women’s insistence on love. Though not emphasising the conflicts between women and men, these directors’ partiality toward female roles is noticeable. While male roles in these films collectively display a series of negative personalities characterised as selfish, cold, naive, and weak, female roles are portrayed as beautiful, kind and sensitive. Similar to their female counterparts, these directors also tend to highlight women’s beauty and tears. Moreover, their filmic representations – the consideration of people’s psychological worlds, the sentimental visual style, and the exquisite narrative – present feminine temperament as strong. As discussed above, female

⁵ Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, 40.

directors emphasise femininity in their films to highlight their own identification as women. However, what kind of identification do these male directors assemble, construct, or perform within their feminine filmic representation? From Chapter 6 to Chapter 8, I examined their own identification in their films across three different periods respectively.

While these directors were still unknown to most people either in China or overseas, they enjoyed delving into women's complexity of "I", that is, as I described in Chapter 6, "Veronique style" stories. Although they could not help gazing at these Chinese Veroniques as sexual beings through the camera lens, they also displaced their subjectivity – their own feeling of lack, identity confusion, and desire for self-discovery – onto these women. Taking up filmmaking in the rapidly changing society of China in the 1990s, these directors were embroiled in an identity crisis between "to be the marginalised" or "to be the mainstream". Because these young directors were keen to be recognised, they needed to choose and perform an identity from which they could benefit. What is interesting is that they opted to hide behind female images so as to make a choice for their own identification. Whether choosing to be marginalised or mainstream, they constructed their identification with a very feminine discourse.

As Hall points out, identification is always "in process"⁶. After gaining some recognition and applause in the international and Chinese cinema arena, those

⁶ Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?", 2.

directors who originally adopted the cultural identity of the marginalised, to be precise, those who took up independent filmmaking in the 1990s, started to feel dissatisfied with being “underground”. Sooner or later, many of them, like Zhang Yuan and Lou Ye, embarked on their journey of “returning home”, namely returning to mainstream film production in China. To contemporary Chinese filmmakers, to be mainstream meant that they must meet the double requirements from the censorship and the market. On the one hand, they must keep being “correct” in the ideological and political sphere. On the other hand, they need to compose their filmic narrative with the film language that addresses itself to the mass audience’s aesthetic tendency. Lou Ye failed in this transition, because he tried to cut both ways in identification. In *Purple Butterfly*, he insists on a sub-cultural/elitist posture in his cultural standpoint through employing unconventional film language while he assumes a humble posture to conform to the mainstream ideology. By contrast, Zhang Yuan succeeded in breaking into the mainstream film industry with his *Seventeen Years*. He embraced the mainstream discourse altogether in the spheres of politics, ideology, and aesthetics. The very results of these films illustrate the fact that a director needs to construct a proper cultural identity in a certain cultural context and for a certain market/audience group. Therefore, the choice of whether to be independent or mainstream filmmakers, in a certain sense, is the choice of a role from which they can benefit in a certain historical period, in a particular political and cultural circumstance and at a certain stage of personal career development. Coincidentally or not, both Lou and Zhang use women in leading roles in their transitional works. Through speaking behind female

masks, they perform docile gestures in terms of political discourse. Furthermore, since 2004, far fewer Chinese directors like to be called as “independent filmmaker”. After benefiting from playing repressed and rebellious sons on the international stage, these Chinese independent filmmakers turned to performing docile daughters to get access to the mainstream Chinese market.

After experiencing the “independent production” movement in the 1990s and the “return home” stream at the turn of the 21st century, the male directors’ identification embodied in their films with female-protagonists present a new tendency: they do not identify themselves with these women or with the men who are gazing at these women, but identify themselves with boys who are “impotent” to these women. Despite trying very hard to simulate female self-narratives, they do not succeed in hiding their own points of view. As experienced directors, they make self-contradictory grammatical mistakes in terms of film language because they cannot avoid inserting historical and political narratives into female romances; neither can they avoid being present within these historical and political narratives. However, they create female roles to experience the tides of the times while they themselves appear in the filmic narrative as weak and powerless boys/sons. That is to say, they expect to be present in the historical narrative, but cannot or do not desire to share the leading roles. What is embodied in these filmic romances directed by the male post-fifth-generation directors is precisely the discourse of the weak son’s generation, namely, the oppressed, the powerless, and the non-privileged. Telling women’s love stories as powerless men, they avoid stating openly their political stand, and manage

to disguise the narrative of a masculine history of outward fight as a feminine one of inward experience.

Despite the fact that these male directors prefer to construct female-centred narratives in their filmic representation, their simulation of female discourse is full of flaws. In *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*, the female protagonists are each placed in the subject-position of narratives, yet still in the position of “to be looked at”. The unintelligible narrative and illusive visual presentation in *Purple Butterfly* led to its double failure in the box-office and among critics. In *Seventeen Years*, the farfetched plots highlighting the leitmotif ideology actually affected the realistic depiction of individuals’ emotion and living condition. In *Summer Palace* and *Teeth of Love*, the experienced directors even made obvious grammar mistakes in film language which led to confusion of narrative subjects. So, why do these men try so hard to simulate female discourse?

Examining the narratives and visual presentation of these male directors’ films, we find that all the filmic techniques and styles they adopt – the sensitive depiction of emotion, the illusive pictures, the exquisite narrative, the tragic women’s stories, and the sentimental tone – are pointing to one word: femininity. They use the feminine discourse presented in their filmic representation to cover the masculine essence of their own sex/gender. Hiding behind women’s masks, they attempt to avoid a masculine identification: either as patricidal/rebellious son or as nation’s son/hero. By contrast, they like to play with feminine identification. Either playing the weepy

women or the powerless boy, they construct their identification within the discourse of the weak, the subaltern, the powerless, and the non-privileged. Through constructing female-centred narratives and simulating female discourse, they gain access by identifying themselves with the feminine. They are not women, but they can use the power of femininity/feminine discourse.

Though having different sexes/genders, the female and male directors studied in this thesis share one common characteristic in their filmic representation, that is, femininity. Both the portrayal of female characters and the visual styles of the film *per se* present a very feminine discourse. The occupation of film director endows those who devote themselves to it with the right to speak. Furthermore, as Baudrillard states, the function of power between masculinity and femininity is reversible. So what the contemporary directors present and how they sustain their right of speaking today demonstrate the power relation between femininity and masculinity. Thus, according to their identification, we can assume that a feminine identification is more beneficial to the Chinese post-fifth-generation directors nowadays. Though this thesis has not devoted itself to discussing the issue of feminism *per se*, it gets access to deconstruct the cultural meaning of “feminist”. Whether these directors present a feminist discourse or not in their filmic representation, feminist itself, in a post-modernism context, is rather a cultural posture and label than a cultural standpoint. So, the question of “whether to be feminist or not” should be translated as “whether to use/perform feminist discourse or not”. To these directors, the answer to this question depends on whether “feminist” is a feminine or masculine word. Today, the female

Conclusion

directors collectively deny that they are feminist, because the name of feminist still connotes masculinity within a Chinese discursive context. However, power is productive, discursive formations are dynamic, and identification is a process that is never complete. It is possible that these directors (including the male ones) or the younger-generation Chinese directors might collectively become feminist tomorrow. To pose as feminist or not is always a discursive issue, and the reader may find that I have opted out of performing this discourse in my process of studying these contemporary Chinese filmmakers.

Appendix

A Brief Review of Chinese Film

Beginnings: 1986-1920s

Film was introduced to China in the 1890s by French, American and Spanish showmen. The first recorded screening of a motion picture in China occurred in Shanghai on August 11, 1896, as an “act” on a variety bill. The Chinese participation in film production started with documentary filmmaking: a recording of the Beijing opera *Conquering Jun Mountain* (定军山, Dingjunshan, dir. Ren Qingtai, 任庆泰) was made in November 1905 as the first Chinese film.¹ “As if by coincidence, the opera movie as a distinguished Chinese genre came into being.”²

However, Chinese filmmaking as an industry did not begin until 1912, when Zhang Shichuan (张石川) and Zheng Zhengqiu (郑正秋) cooperated with the Americans in charge of the Asia Company (亚细亚影戏公司, Yaxiya yingxi gongsi, set up by Benjamin Brasky in 1909) and produced *The Difficult Couple* (难夫难妻, Nanfunanqi, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1913). Soon after, Shanghai became an early filmmaking centre in China. During World War I, Commercial Press³ (上海商务印书馆, Shanghai shangwu yinshuguan) imported a set of filmmaking equipment from

¹ Martin Geiselmann, “Chinese Film History: A Short Introduction” (The University of Vienna-Sinologie Program, 2006), accessed July 20, 2011, http://www.univie.ac.at/Sinologie/repository/ueLK110_ChinFilmgesch/filmgeschichteSkript.pdf.

² Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology: A Centennial Review of Chinese Cinema”, *World Literature Today* 77 (Oct.-Dec. 2009): 8.

³ Commercial Press was the first modern publishing organization in China, founded by Xia Ruifang (夏瑞芳), BaoXian'en(鲍咸恩), Bao Chengchang (鲍成昌), and Gao Fengchi (高凤池) in Shanghai in 1897.

the United States and began film production in 1917. In 1921, Commercial Press made the first two feature-length films – *Yan Ruisheng* (阎瑞生, Yan Ruisheng, dir. Ren Pengnian, 任彭年) and *Ten Sisters* (红粉骷髅, Hongfen kulou, dir. Guan Haifeng, 管海峰). In the same year, Du Yu (杜宇) established the Shanghai Photoplay Company (上海影戏公司, Shanghai yingxi gongsi) and directed *Sea Oath* (海誓, Haishi).

During the 1920s, some Chinese production companies came into being, notably Star Company (明星影片公司, Mingxing yingpian gongsi) and Unique Company (天一影片公司, Tianyi yingpian gongsi). Star was founded by Zheng Zhengqiu, Zhang Shichuan, Zhou Jianyun (周剑云) and Zheng Zhegu (郑鹧鸪) in Shanghai in 1922, specialising in family drama, “a kind of story about the tribulations of life in a changing society that tended to glorify Confucian virtues such as female chastity and filial piety”⁴. This theme was exemplified by *Labourer's Love* (劳工之爱情, Laogongzhi aiqing, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1922) and *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (孤儿救祖记, Gu'er jiuzuji, dir. Zhang Shixhuan, 1923). Soon after, some other film production companies – such as Great Wall-Lily Photoplay Company⁵ (大中华百合影片公司, Dazhonghua baihe yingpian gongsi), Shenzhou Photoplay Company⁶ (神州影片公司, Shenzhou yingpian gongsi), and Minxin Photoplay Company⁷ (民新影片公司, Minxin yingpian gongsi) – emerged in Shanghai and adopted a similar film

⁴ Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology”, 8.

⁵ Great Wall-Lily Photoplay Company was invested and established by Chinese local enterpriser Wu Xingzai (吴性裁).

⁶ Shenzhou Photoplay Company was founded by Wang Xuchang (汪煦昌) who came back from France.

⁷ Minxin Photoplay Company was established by Li Minwei (黎民伟) in Hong Kong in 1923, then shifted to Guangzhou in 1924 and to Shanghai in 1926.

model and themes as Star. But unlike the trendy features on contemporary issues produced by the companies mentioned above, Unique, founded by the Shaw brothers (邵氏兄弟, shaoshi xiongdi) in Shanghai in 1925, developed its brand name by making costume dramas adapting popular Chinese folk tales, myths and legends. What further distinguished Unique from its competitors was its attempt to venture into foreign markets. Their *White Snake* (白蛇传, Baishezhuan, dir. Shao Zuiweng, 邵醉翁, 1926) proved a typical example of their success in the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. As Zhang Yingjin (张英进) argues, “making costume dramas was a lucrative business in the mid-1920s”⁸, because costumes and props were readily available from theatre troupes, and the general Chinese audience (usually undereducated) enjoyed watching these entertainment movies. Being enlightened by Unique’s successful practices, most other photoplay companies began to focus on costume dramas. Several small trends then came one after another, from historical subject to martialsubject to unreal stories featuring gods, spirits and demons. In 1928, Star started to make a sixteen-part film series, *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (火烧红莲寺, Huoshao hongliansi, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1928-1931), which began a trend of costume sword-play films. This trend gradually faded out after the Jan. 28th Incident⁹ in 1932. In general, film production in the 1920s aimed at box office success much more than at expressing ideological and political issues. Since the KMT did not establish its central government in Nanjing until 1927, film production in this period was relatively free from government interference.

⁸ Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology”: 9.

⁹ At Jan. 28th 1932, the Japanese army suddenly attacked the Zhabei district from the Japanese Concession in Shanghai.

The Leftist Movement, the War of Resistance period and the post-war boom: 1930s-1949

In 1930, Luo Mingyou (罗明佑) organised a giant enterprise, United Photoplay Service (联华影业公司, Lianhua yingye gongsi). United recruited directors like Sun Yun (孙瑜) and Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生), who were influenced by the spirit of social intervention related to the May Fourth¹⁰ (五四, Wusi) tradition, and produced in the years following a number of progressive films focusing on common people and social reality, such as *Three Modern Women* (三个摩登女性, Sange modeng nǚxing, dir. Bu Wancang, 卜万苍, 1933), *Goddess* (神女, Shennǚ, dir. Wu Yonggang, 吴永刚, 1934), *New Woman* (新女性, Xinnǚxing, dir. Cai Chu Sheng, 1934), and *The Big Road* (大路, Dalu, dir. Sun Yu, 1935). Star soon followed United opening its door to the leftists. According to Zhang Yingjin, this was “partly because of its financial difficulties and partly because of the vision of mass education shared between the leftists and the liberal directors like Zheng Zhengqiu”¹¹. In 1932, Zhou Jianyun invited Xia Yan(夏衍), Yang Hansheng (杨汉生), Zheng Junping (郑君平), and Qian qianwu (钱谦五) to join in its scriptwriting team with Zheng Zhengqiu and Hong Shen (洪深). Soon after, they produced a number of leftist films emphasising the

¹⁰ The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement growing out of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, protesting the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially the Shandong Problem. These demonstrations sparked national protests and marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism, a shift towards political mobilization and away from cultural activities, and a move towards populist base rather than intellectual elites.

¹¹ Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology”: 9.

social issues of class exploitation, social inequality, women's liberty, and national crises, such as *Spring Silkworms* (春蚕, Chuncan, dir. Cheng Bugao, 程步高, 1933), *Wild Torrents* (狂流, Kuangliu, dir. Cheng Bugao, 1933), *Two Sisters* (姊妹花, Zimeihua, dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1933), and *Nation Survival* (民族生存, Minzu shengcun, dir. Xia Yan, 1933). Two new studios were also active in leftist film production, Diantong (电通) and Yihua (艺华). Developed from a company dealing in film record equipment, Diantong specialised in sound films such as *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (桃李劫, Taolijie, dir. Ying Yunwei, 应云卫, 1934) and *Children of Troubled Times* (风云儿女, Fengyun ernü, dir. Xu Xingzhi, 许幸之, 1935). It is notable that "The March of the Volunteers" (义勇军进行曲, Yiyongjun jinxingqu) composed by Nie Er (聂耳) and written by Tian Han (田汉), which is the theme song of *Children of Troubled Times*, would be adopted as the national Anthem of the PRC decades later. Under the guidance of Tian Han, Yihua, a studio established in 1932, also produced several leftist films in 1933.

However, the collective ideological left-turn in several production companies alarmed the KMT right wingers. The KMT government started to police the ideological content of films, including strictly censoring scripts and unedited print, increasing pressure on filmmakers and company operators, and even committing vandalism at the studio facilities of Yihua. Under this political pressure, the leftists retreated from Yihua in 1935. The company then was taken over by some filmmakers who produced a kind of entertaining urban light comedy that ignored social and political issues, called "soft film". Nonetheless, the leftist filmmakers persisted in

their filmmaking in a more secretive way and claimed a number of outstanding films, such as *Fleeing by the Night* (夜奔, Yeben, dir. Cheng Bugao, 1937), *Crossroads* (十字街头, Shizijietou, dir. Shen Xiling, 沈西苓, 1937), *Street Angel* (马路天使, Malu tianshi, dir. Yuan Muzhi, 袁牧之, 1937) and *The New Year's Gift* (压岁钱, Yasuiqian, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1937).

Unlike these production companies supporting the leftist artists, Unique company, one of the three biggest film production companies (the other two were United and Star), was still market-driven. With the film sound technique introduced to China in early 1930s, Unique and Star competed in producing talkies. Since early 1930, the Chinese filmmakers started to experiment with sound movies. Star first released a wax record sound movie *Singer Hongmudan* (歌女红牡丹, Genü hongmudan, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1931). Almost at the same time, Great Wall-Lilly produced a phonofilm *Blue Sky after Raining* (雨过天青, Yuguotianqing, dir. Xia Chifeng, 夏赤凤, 1931) in Japan and released it in Shanghai cinemas in June 1931. Employing film and recording technicians, as well as equipment from the United States, Unique released a phonofilm *Pleasure of the Dance Hall* (歌场春色, Gechang chunse, dir. Li Pingqian, 李萍倩, 1931) three months later. Star also completed a phonofilm *In the Old Beijing* (旧时京华 Jiushi jinghua, dir. Zhang Shichuan) in January 1932. After helping to install sound systems in 139 theatres in Southeast Asia, Unique established its Hong Kong studio in 1934 and started producing Cantonese cinema.

The Japanese invasion of China ended this golden run in Chinese film. Being occupied by the Japanese army in November 1937, Shanghai became a solitary island. All production companies there except Xinhua (新华) closed shop, and many filmmakers fled Shanghai, relocating to Hong Kong, Chongqing, and Yan'an. Adopting different ideologies, the films produced in KMT-governed areas (Wuhan and Chongqing), Japanese occupation areas (Northeast China and Shanghai) and the Revolutionary Base Area (Yan'an) respectively presented very different films in respect to theme and style.

In 29th January 1938, a film community of Resistance War against Japanese was founded in Wuhan. This community consisted of filmmakers of different political attitudes (including communist, KMT), but united by patriotism. From January to October 1938 when Wuhan fell to Japan, they completed three feature films and around fifty documentaries which all highlighted resistance to the Japanese invasion. After Wuhan was occupied by the Japanese, the KMT shifted the production centre to Chongqing, the new wartime capital. Two studios – Central Film (中央电影摄影场, Zhongyang dianying sheyingchang) and China Motion Pictures (中国电影制片厂, Zhongguo dianying zhipianchang) – were relocated there and produced several patriotic films encouraging people to defend the motherland, such as *Children of China* (中华儿女, zhonghua ernü, dir. Shen Xiling, 1939), *March of Victory* (胜利进行曲, Shengli jinxingqu, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1940) and *Wings of China* (长空万里, Changkongwanli, dir. Sun Yu, 1941). But the limitation in film stocks prevented growth in production. Both studios stopped working from 1941 for a variety of

reasons until 1943, when China Motion Pictures resumed filmmaking.

The Shanghai film industry, though severely curtailed, did not stop however, thus leading to the so-called “Solitary Island” (孤島, Gudao) period, with Shanghai’s foreign Concessions (租界, Zujie) serving as an “island” of production in the “sea” of Japanese occupied territory. Zhang Shankun, the operator of Xinhua, was the first to resume filmmaking in the Concessions after Shanghai was occupied. Following the pre-war Unique tradition, Zhang Shankun produced politically neutral but commercially successful films, and the chosen genre was costume drama, exemplified by *Mulan Joins the Army* (木兰从军, *Mulan congjun*, dir. Bu Wancang, 1939). Between 1939 and 1941, around seventy costume dramas adapted from fictitious historical stories, folklore, serial novels and theatre dramas were released in Shanghai. Some of these films, such as *Su Wu Herds Sheep* (苏武牧羊, *Suwu muyang*, dir. Bu Wancang, 1940) and *Li Xiangjun* (李香君, *Lixiangjun*, dir. Wu Cun, 吴村, 1940) conveyed patriotic sentiments subtly. After the Pacific War¹² broke out in December 1941, the film industry in Solitary Island was controlled by Japanese to make films promoting the concept of a Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere¹³ (大东亚共荣圈, *Dadongya gongrongquan*). Also promoting the sphere ideology were the products from Manchurian¹⁴ Motion Pictures (满映, *Manying*), a Japanese-controlled studio

¹² The Pacific War refers broadly to the parts of World War II that took place in the Pacific Ocean, its islands, and in the Far East. The term Pacific War is used to encompass the Pacific Ocean theatre, the South West Pacific theatre, the South-East Asian theatre and the Second Sino-Japanese War, also including the 1945 Soviet-Japanese conflict.

¹³ The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a concept created and promulgated during the Shōwa era by the government and military of the Empire of Japan. It represented the desire to create a self-sufficient “bloc of Asian nations led by the Japanese and free of Western powers”.

¹⁴ Manchuria is a historical name given to a large geographic region in northeast Asia. Depending on the definition of its extent, Manchuria usually falls entirely within the PRC, or is sometimes divided

located in north-eastern China.

A small-scale production team was established in the Communist-controlled Yan'an area with the help of some filmmakers from Shanghai like Yuan Muzhi, Wu Yinxian (吴印咸) and Xu Xiaobing (徐肖冰). Instead of making feature narrative films, the production in Yan'an focussed on shooting documentaries and training film personnel.

The film industry continued to develop after 1945 when World War II ended. Right after the war, a team of Communists transported part of the equipment out of Manchurian Motion Pictures and set up the Northeast Studio (东北电影制片厂, Dongbei dianying zhipianchang) in Xingshan (兴山) in 1946. Similar to the production in Yan'an, Northeast Studio took up documentary production, as well as producing some scientific educational films and animations.

Later in the year, the KMT Department of Propaganda confiscated the rest of the equipment in Manchuria and set up the Changchun Studio (长春电影制片厂, Changchun dianying zhipianchang), which was attached to Central Film. Nevertheless, the major post-war KMT facilities were Central Film's two studios in Shanghai and one in Beijing, with the majority of their releases glorifying KMT images. However, several films criticising KMT corruption, such as *Diary of a Homecoming* (还乡日记, Huanxiang riji, dir. Zhang Junxiang, 张骏祥, 1947), *Dreaming in Paradise* (天堂春梦, Tiantangchunmeng, dir. Tang Xiaodan, 汤晓丹, 1947), and *Remote Love* (遥远的

between China and Russia. The region is commonly referred to as Northeast China (东北, Dongbei). The region is the homeland of the Manchus, after whom Manchuria is named.

爱, Yaoyuande'ai, dir. Chen Liting, 陈鲤庭, 1947), also came out from these studios.

Private companies played a significant role in the post-war boom. In 1946, Cai Chusheng returned to Shanghai to revive the United name as the United Film Society. This in turn became Kunlun Studios (昆仑影业公司, Kunlun yingye gongsi), which gathered many pre-war leftist artists and specialised in social intervention. With release of a number of classics like *The Spring River Flows East* (一江春水向东流, Yijiangchunshui xiangdongliu, dir. Cai Chusheng & Zheng Junli, 郑君里, 1947), *Myriad of Lights* (万家灯火, Wanjia denghuo, dir. Shen Fu, 沈浮, 1948), Kunlun became one of the most important studios of the era. Many of these films revealed disillusionment with the oppressive rule of the KMT and depicted the powerless people in solidarity against an evil power, which “exemplified a kind of critical realism traceable to the pre-war social realism”¹⁵.

Meanwhile, companies like Culture Films (文华影业公司, Wenhua yingye gongsi) moved from the leftist tradition and explored the evolution and development of other dramatic genres. Its romantic drama *Spring in a Small Town* (小城之春, Xiaochengzhichun, dir. Fei Mu, 费穆, 1948), shortly before the revolution, is often regarded by Chinese film critics as one of the most important films in the history of Chinese cinema, and was remade by Tian Zhuangzhuang (田壮壮) in 2002. Several other films produced by Culture Films like *The Inn at Night* (夜店, Yedian, dir. Huang Zuolin, 黄佐临, 1947) and *Phony Phoenixes* (假凤虚凰, Jiafengxuhuang, dir.

¹⁵ Zhang Yinjing, “Industry and Ideology”: 11.

Huang Zuolin, 1947) also presented some Chinese filmmakers' artistic pursuits instead of political ones. These films were also well accepted by the audience at that time; for example, the Grand Theatre in Shanghai sold 165,000 tickets for *Phony Phoenixes*.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese production developed quickly and presented diversity in theme, ideology, genre, and style, bringing Chinese cinema closer to international developments such as modernism, expressionism and neo-realism, whilst simultaneously keeping traditional Chinese aesthetics. As Zhang Yingjin argues:

By the end of the 1940s, film was no longer seen as pure visual entertainment, nor as mere moral preaching; it was an art form in which the artists and the audience alike confronted and negotiated pressing social issues and imagined various solutions, be they revolutionary or conservative.¹⁶

Moreover, this period also produced the first big Chinese movie stars, namely Hu Die (胡蝶), Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉), Zhou Xuan (周璇), Zhao Dan (赵丹), Jin Yan (金焰), and others.

“Seventeen Years” and Cultural Revolution: 1949-1976

The Seventeen years between the establishment of PRC and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1949-1966), “the film production in mainland China as well as

¹⁶ Ibid.

the related historical phenomena and reality structured a particular period within Chinese cinema history, which is usually called ‘Seventeen Years’ Chinese cinema’.¹⁷

After taking Beijing (known as Beiping at that time) from the KMT, CCP established a film bureau, Central Administration of Film (中央电影事业管理局, Zhongyang dianyingshiye guanliju). Yuan Muzhi was named the first Chief Inspector. In the same year, three state-run studios, namely Shanghai Studio (上海电影制片厂, Shanghai dianying zhipianchang), Beijing Studio (北京电影制片厂, Beijing dianying zhipianchang) and Northeast Studio (renamed as Changchun in 1955), were established from the facilities confiscated from KMT studios. A film censorship system which supervised all films from screenplay to postproduction was soon set up. From this time, Chinese film production and filmmakers started to experience a huge change.

One change was the termination of Hollywood’s decade-long domination in China. From August 1945 to May 1949, Shanghai had imported more than one thousand films from the United States. However, only one American film, which presented the “progressive” ideology consistent with that of the CCP so that it “was not like an American film”¹⁸, was imported in the next twenty-seven years. By

¹⁷ Shi Chuan, “Study and Writing of “Seventeen Years” History of Chinese Film”, *Dianying yishu* 5 (2001): 112. 1949-1966 年中国大陆范围内的电影创作与相关的历史现象和历史事实,构成中国当代电影史的一个特殊断代,人们习惯地称之为“十七年”中国电影。

¹⁸ Ding Yaping argues that *Salt of the Earth* (Chinese translation: 社会中坚, shehuizhongjian, dir. David Wolfe & Rosaura Revueltas, 1954, released in China in 1959) was an independent American film produced out of Hollywood system, and the ideology presented in it was very close to the mainstream ideology in 1950s China. Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema* (Beijing: China Forecast and Television Publication, 2008), 162.

contrast, Soviet films were considered to be progressive by the government and the general audiences, being inculcated with a collectivist and communist ideology at that time. The arrival of a number of Soviet and Eastern European films impressed the contemporary Chinese audience and influenced the Chinese mainland production in the spheres of ideology, aesthetics, and visual presentation.

Another prominent change was that the private studios faded out of production within two or three years. In the beginning, a dozen private studios could request screenplays or develop their own. In 1949, Kunlun produced several classics like *Three Women* (丽人行, Lirenxing, dir. Chen Liting), and *Crows and Sparrows* (乌鸦与麻雀, Wuya yu maque, dir. Zheng Junli). One year later, Kunlun and some other private studios were restructured to be Shanghai United Studio (上海联合电影制片厂, Shanghai lianhe dianying zhipianchang). Between 1949 and 1951, Culture Films released some films which deprecated the KMT government, such as *Corrosion* (腐蚀, Fushi, dir. Huang Zuolin, 1950), *This Life of Mine* (我这一辈子, Wozhe yibeizi, dir. Shi Hui, 石挥, 1950), *Captain Guan* (关连长, Guan lianzhang, dir. Shi Hui, 1951), and *Stand up, Sisters* (姐妹们站起来, Jiejiemeimei zhanqilai, dir. Chen Xihe, 陈西禾, 1951). However, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) published an editorial “Pay Serious Attention to the Discussion of the Film *The Life of Wu Xun*” (应当重视电影《武训传》的讨论) in *People’s Daily* (人民日报, Renmin ribao) in 20th May 1951, which launched a nationwide campaign criticising a Kunlun release *The Life of Wu Xun* (武训传, Wuxun zhuan, dir. Sun Yu, 1950). Mao’s editorial created a panicky atmosphere in mainland production that made every filmmaker feel insecure. When

reviewing this incident, Xia Yan said:

The critique of *The Life of Wu Xun* significantly influenced the film production and intellectuals. There were twenty-five to twenty-six films produced in mainland China between 1950 and 1951, but the number dramatically dropped to two in 1952. The scriptwriters did not dare write and the studio directors did not dare make decisions. A trend of “avoiding mistakes rather than gaining achievements” permeated the whole cultural field.¹⁹

The private studios could barely survive in such a severe production environment. All private studios including Kunlun and Culture Films merged under state management in 1953.

Compared with private production, the films produced by state-run studios were more devoted to advocating class struggle and Communist heroism. Most of them – such as *Daughters of China* (中华女儿, *Zhonghua nǚ’er*, dir. Zhai Qiang, 翟强, 1949) and *Zhao Yiman* (赵一曼, *Zhaoyiman*, dir. Sha Meng, 沙蒙, 1950) – addressed the War of Resistance and War of Liberation. *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女, *Baimaonü*, dir. Wang Bin & Shui Hua, 王滨、水华, 1950), a film adapted from an Opera of the same name and presenting the theme that “the Old society turned the people into ghosts, and the new society turned ghosts into people”, is a typical case of success at that time. Though being in accord with socialist ideology, the production in

¹⁹ Xia Yan, “About the incident of *The Life of Wuxun*”, *wenhui dianying shibao*, July 16, 1994. 《武训传》的批判对电影界，对知识分子，影响还是很大的，1950年，1951年全国年产故事片二十六部，1952年骤减到两部。剧作者不敢写，厂长不敢下决心了，文化界形成了一种不求有功，但求无过的风气。

state-run studios was also impacted by Mao's editorial. Except for two releases *From Victory to Victory* (南征北战, Nanzhengbeizhan, dir. Cheng Yin & Tang Xiaodan, 成荫、汤晓丹, 1952) and *Longxu Gou* (龙须沟, Longxugou, dir. Xian Qun, 冼群, 1952), film production in China was frozen in 1952.

In December 1953, the Chinese government announced a "Determination to Increase Film Production" (关于加强电影制片工作的决定, Guanyu jiaqiang dianyingzhipiangongzuo de jue ding) in which it valued the educational and entertainment function of cinema, encouraged a diversity of film theme and form, and decided to increase the quantity of new releases. It revived Chinese film production to a degree. During the period 1953 to 1957, the state-run studios produced quite a few feature films providing both entertainment and ideological considerations, such as *Reconnaissance Across the Yangtze* (渡江侦察记, Dujiang zhenchaji, dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1953), *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (梁山伯与祝英台, Liangshanbo yu zhuyingtai, dir. Wang Tianlin, 王天林, 1954), *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (天仙配, Tianxianpei, dir. Shi Hui, 1955), *Dong Cunrui* (董存瑞, Dongcunrui, dir. Guo Wei, 郭维, 1955), *Li Shizhen* (李时珍, Lishizhen, dir. Shen Fu, 1956), *Family* (家, Jia, dir. Chen Xihe, 1956), *New Year Sacrifice* (祝福, Zhufu, dir. Sang Hu, 桑弧, 1956), *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (女篮五号, Nülanwuhao, dir. Xie Jin, 谢晋, 1957). Moreover, motivated by the "Hundred Flowers Blossom" (百花齐放, Baihuaqifang) policy, a slogan to encourage diversity in art creation announced by Mao in 1956, some filmmakers broke out of the military and political film stereotype. The concern for the inner lives of individuals started to revive in some films, as well as some

constructive criticism targeted at party bureaucracies, distrust of intellectuals, and lack of artistic freedom.

However, the Anti-Rightist Campaign²⁰ (反右运动, Fanyou yundong) in 1957, which classified a large number of filmmakers to be Rightist (右派, Youpai), effectively silenced dissident voices. To prevent a recurrence of the production void of 1952, Zhou Yang (周扬), the Vice Minister of the Central Propaganda Ministry, whilst speaking at a conference in 1958, declared that studios must increase the quantity of film production. This policy extended the Great Leap Forward (大跃进, Dayuejin)²¹ campaign from the industrial sphere to film production. The campaign generated a frenetic atmosphere in production: all the provinces were busy building their own studios, and film output increased dramatically – 299 films were produced in three years between 1958 and 1960, in contrast to the 149 films produced in the previous nine years. Some seasoned filmmakers managed to produce a number of quality films, such as *Five Golden Flowers* (五朵金花, Wuduojinhua, dir. Wang Jiayi, 王家乙, 1959), *Nie Er* (聂耳, Nie'er, dir. Zheng Junli, 1959), *The Opium Wars* (林则徐, Linzexu, dir. Zheng Junli, 1959), *The Lin Family Shop* (林家铺子, Linjia puzi, dir. Shui Hua, 1959), *Third Sister Liu* (刘三姐, Liusan jie, dir. Su Li, 苏里, 1960), and *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, Hongse niangziju, dir. Xie Jin, 1960).

²⁰ The Anti-Rightist Movement of PRC in the 1950s and early 1960s consisted of a series of campaigns to purge alleged “rightists” in China. The definition of “rightists” was not always consistent, sometimes including critics to the left of the government, but officially referred to those intellectuals who appeared to favour capitalism and class divisions and against collectivisation. The campaigns were instigated by Mao Zedong and saw the political persecution of an estimated 550,000.

²¹ The Great Leap Forward of the PRC was an economic and social campaign, reflected in planning decisions from 1958 to 1961, which aimed to use China's vast population to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a modern communist society through the process of rapid industrialization and collectivization.

Following the policy of “readjustment, consolidation, filling out and raising standards” announced by the Central government, Chinese film production entered a readjustment period from 1961 to 1966. A climax of film creation emerged after 1962, when the first party for the Hundred Flowers Awards²² (百花奖, Baihuajiang) was held. A number of quality films appeared in this period, such as *Li Shuangshuang* (李双双, Lishuangshuang, dir. Lu Ren, 鲁韧, 1962), *February* (早春二月, Zaochun eryue, dir. Xie Tieli, 谢铁骊, 1963), *Visitors on the Ice Mountain* (冰山上的来客, Bingshangshangde laike, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 赵心水, 1963), *Ashima* (阿诗玛, Ashima, dir. Liu Qiong, 刘琼, 1964), *Stage Sisters* (舞台姐妹, Wutai jiemei, dir. Xie Jin, 1965), and *Living Forever in Burning Flames* (烈火中永生, Liehuozhong yongsheng, dir. Shui Hua, 1965).

During the Seventeen Years period, 603 feature films and 8,342 reels of documentaries and newsreels were produced. Meanwhile, the education and technology of filmmaking also developed. In 1956, Beijing Film Academy was established, specialising in educating filmmakers. The first wide-screen Chinese film was produced in 1960. Most films produced during this period were sponsored as political propaganda. As Zhang Yingjing puts it:

Conceived as an effective propaganda weapon of class struggle, socialist cinema was devoted to serving workers, peasants, and soldiers, who were to emulate

²² The Hundred Flowers Awards are considered, together with the Golden Rooster Awards, as the most prestigious film awards in China. The awards were set up by China Film Association in 1962 and sponsored by *Popular Cinema* (大众电影, Dazhong dianying) magazine, which has the largest circulation in China. The awards were formerly voted annually by the readers of *Popular Cinema*.

Communist heroes and martyrs on screen.²³

As a result, the Seventeen Years films were restrained into some certain stereotypes with respect to theme, story, form, character design and visual presentation. The CCP's severe policing of ideological messages in artwork compelled artists to choose ideologically safer genres like revolutionary history, war, opera movies, ethnic minority, and literary adaptation.

The periodic political interference produced a zigzag pattern of development in Chinese cinema. One of the worst periods was the Cultural Revolution, which lasted ten years (1966-1976) and almost destroyed film production in China.

The Cultural Revolution was launched in May 1966. Mao alleged that bourgeois elements were entering the government and society at large and Chinese people should remove these revisionists (修正主义, Xiuzheng zhuyi) through violent class struggle. Intellectuals (including the filmmakers), who were classified as "petty bourgeois" (小资产阶级, Xiaozichan jieji) who must reform themselves under the CCP guidance and contribute to socialist construction in the previous campaigns, then all became the "ghosts and monsters" (牛鬼蛇神, Niuguisheshen) who should be beaten down and even eliminated in socialist China. In terms of cinema, the Cultural Revolution totally negated the achievements of the first seventeen years of socialist cinema and banned almost all previous films as "poisonous weeds" (毒草, Ducao). A record of zero feature production from 1967 to 1969 was a direct result of this

²³ Zhang Yingjin, "Industry and Ideology", 11.

relentless political persecution. From 1970 on, Mao's wife Jiang Qing (江青), who played an important role as the leading figure of the Gang of Four²⁴ (四人帮, sirenbang) during the Cultural Revolution, sponsored the filming of the eight Revolutionary Model Operas (革命样板戏, Geming yangbanxi)²⁵. These films strictly obey Jiang Qing's "three prominences" principle (三突出, Santuchu) and thus: "give prominence to positive characters among all the characters, to heroes among the positive characters, to the principal hero among the heroes"²⁶. This principle was translated into a set of formulaic film techniques, dictating that the hero must be located at the centre of the frame, shot from a low angle, bathed in bright light and warm colours, and appear always larger than the villain, who was treated with exactly opposite techniques. From 1973 to September 1976, seventy-six feature films were released in mainland China.²⁷ Besides the eight Model Operas, most of them were produced with Jiang Qing's guidance, including some colour remakes of a few

²⁴ The Gang of Four was the name given to a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution and were subsequently charged with a series of treasonous crimes. The members consisted of Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao (张春桥), Yao Wenyuan (姚文元), and Wang Hongwen (王洪文). The Gang of Four, together with the contemporary Vice Chairmen Lin Biao, were labeled the two major "counter-revolutionary forces" of the Cultural Revolution and officially blamed by the Chinese government for the worst excesses of the societal chaos that ensued during the ten years of turmoil. Their downfall on October 1976, a mere month after Mao's death, marked the end of a turbulent political era in China.

²⁵ Revolutionary model opera refers to the operas planned and engineered during the Cultural Revolution by Jiang Qing. As Communist Party-sanctioned operas, they were considered "revolutionary" and modern in terms of thematic and musical features, thus were the only forms of artistic expression allowed in China at that time. In total, eight revolutionary operas were made, namely, *The Red Lantern* (红灯记, Hongdengji), *Shajia Village* (沙家浜, Shajiabang), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategies* (智取威虎山, Zhiqu weihushan), *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (奇袭白虎团, Qixi baihutuan), *Praise of Dragon River* (龙江颂, Longjiangsong), *On the Dock* (海港, Haigang), *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, Hongse niangzijun), and *White-Haired Girl* (白毛女, Baimaonü).

²⁶ Chinese original: 在所有人物中突出正面人物; 在正面人物中突出英雄人物; 在英雄人物中突出主要英雄人物。

²⁷ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 190.

black-and-white films she had approved, and several new features that attacked her political opponents like *Breaking with Old Ideas* (决裂, Juelie, dir. Li Wenhua, 李文化, 1975). However, some “incongruous” art creation still existed, such as *Exploitation* (创业, Chuangye, dir. Yu Yanfu, 余彦夫, 1974) and *Hai Xia* (海霞, Haixia, dir. Chen Huai'ai, 陈怀皐, 1975). Though these were criticised severely by Jiang Qing, the films were eventually screened in cinema after the artists' insistent petition.

During the decade of the Cultural Revolution, most Chinese filmmakers suffered from political oppression and almost all their films were banned. It generated a peculiar and absurd cultural scene in which only eight films were available to Chinese audiences. Shortly after Mao's death, the CCP liberals arrested Jiang and other members of the Gang of Four in October 1976, promoting major celebrations on the streets of Beijing and marking the end of ten years of political turbulence in China.

Revival, diversification, and the Fifth Generation: 1976-1993

After the crackdown of the Gang of Four, the central government took up the rehabilitation of those wrongfully accused of crimes during the Cultural Revolution. Most filmmakers were vindicated from the horrible accusation of being Rightists or Capitalist Roaders (走资派, Zouzipai). By October 1978 more than six hundred Chinese films, which had been classified as “poisonous weeds”, had been approved to

be screened in cinemas again. Furthermore, some foreign language films – such as the Russian film *Lenin in October* (Lenin v oktyabre Vosstaniye, dir. Dmitri Vasilyev Mikhail Romm, 1937), the English film *Oliver Twist* (dir. David Lean, 1948), the Italian film *The Bicycle Thief* (Ladri di biciclette, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and the Korean film *Flower Girl* (꽃파는 처녀, dir. Kim Jong Il, 1972) – passed film censorship and entered the cinemas in China. Meanwhile, the “Film Weeks” exhibiting films from different countries emerged from 1978 onwards; for example, Romanian Films Week and Japanese Film Week in 1978, Yugoslavian Film Week in 1979, Australian Film week in 1980, American Film Week in 1981, British Film Week in 1982, and so on. To a certain extent, the foreign film exhibitions promoted local film production. First, they attracted quite a few Chinese, who were very curious about overseas culture and life after the long-term closed-door policy, into the cinema. They became a regular film audience. Meanwhile, they introduced a variety of visual language, aesthetic ideas, editing techniques, narrative forms and film styles to Chinese filmmakers, ending the monopoly of Soviet film aesthetics in China.

With the relaxation of the political environment and the encouragement of the central government, Chinese production of feature-films revived gradually: twenty-one in 1977, forty-six in 1978, sixty-five in 1979, and eighty-four in 1980.²⁸ However, the seasoned filmmakers who had suffered from or witnessed political persecution were extremely sensitive to the mercurial political environment and were scared of the political campaigns in the late 1970s. The films produced at that time

²⁸ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 213.

were thus very restrained in their ideology and patterns of thought. In some films – such as *Their Hope* (希望, Xiwang, dir. Xiao Guiyun, 肖桂云, 1977) and *Spring comes Early on the Southern Border* (南疆早春, Nanjiang zaochun, dir. Xiao Lang & Guo Jun, 肖朗, 郭筠, 1978) – either the story or the dialogue contained obvious Cultural Revolution characteristics. Some others, though depicting the stories of “fighting against the Gang of Four”, had similarities with the films made during the previous decade, in story structure, visual language and narrative mode – it was just that the “villain” in the stories changed from the “capitalist roaders” to the Gang of Four and their followers. At that particular historical moment such films, represented by *Storm in October* (十月的风云, Shiyue de fengyun, dir. Zhang Yi, 张一, 1977), *The Course Severe* (严峻的历程, Yanjun de licheng, dir. Zhang Jianyou, 张建佑, 1978), *Unquiet Days* (不平静的日子, Bupingjing de rizi, dir. Yu Deshui, 于得水, 1978), *The Stormed Sea* (风浪, Fenglang, dir. Hu Chengyi, 胡成毅, 1979), resonated with the Chinese audience. On the other hand, from an artistic and entertainment perspective, they were rigid. Most stories can be summarised by the following: “the old cadres are attacked, the youth are cheated, the villains [the Gang of Four and their followers] are aggressive, and the people are defensive”²⁹.

At the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s, the artists’ calls for further relaxing of ideological control were far more vocal. The fourth national congress of writers and artists (1979) explicitly suggested that the CCP should not be arbitrarily meddling in artistic creation. The ban on *Sun and People* (太阳和人, Taiyang he ren, dir. Peng Yu,

²⁹ Ibid. 老干部受打击, 年轻人受蒙蔽, 坏头头张牙舞爪, 群众们都有抵制。

彭宇, 1980), which tells a story of an artist who came back to China after being successful overseas, but was eventually persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution, launched a big debate and even became a kind of political event. In the early 1980s, in spite of the fact that the political situation was still complicated and controversial, the Chinese filmmakers started to pursue a breakthrough in both visual presentation and topic. Meanwhile, Chinese audiences loved films as their preferred form of entertainment at that time, since TV was still a luxury to most normal families. All those factors facilitated a flourishing period of film production: the annual number of features produced remained consistently around 110 or above from 1981 to 1996, with 166 in 1992 as the highest. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that directors belonging to three different generations³⁰ were active in the 1980s.

Those making films before the Cultural Revolution (now labelled as the Third Generation) returned to their favourite genres like revolutionary history and literary adaptation, represented by Cheng Yin's *Xi'an Incident* (西安事变, Xi'an shibian, 1981) and Shui Hua's *Regret for the Past* (伤逝, Shangshi, 1981)³¹. Among them, Xie Jin rose to prominence with his controversial "scar" dramas *The Legend of Tianyuan Mountain* (天云山传奇, Tianyunshan chuanqi, 1981) which criticised the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and *Hibiscus Town* (芙蓉镇, Furongzhen, 1986) which exposed the persecution of innocent people during the Cultural Revolution. Another distinguished film made by a veteran director is Huang Zumo's (黄祖模) *Love on*

³⁰ I introduce the "generation studies" of Chinese cinema and describe the definition of each generation in 1.2.

³¹ The film was adapted from Luxun's (鲁迅) novel with the same title.

Lushan Mountain (庐山恋, Lushanlian, 1980), which walloped the Chinese audiences' eyeballs with the romantic love story, onscreen kiss, and gorgeous actors (especially Zhang Yu's (张瑜) appearance in swimwear) – all these elements had been forbidden in artworks for years.

Actually, Xie Jin was not the first director to venture into “scar films”. Influenced by the Scar Literature³² (伤痕文学, Shanghen wenxue) launched around 1978, the emotional trauma left by the ten years of turbulence became the popular film theme. The first two scar films emerged in China in 1979, namely, *Troubled Laughter* (苦恼人的笑, Kunaoren de xiao, dir. Yang Yanjin, 杨延晋) and *The Thrill of Life* (生活的颤音, Shenghuo de chanyin, dir. Teng Wenji & Wu Tianming, 滕文骥, 吴天明), which were directed by the younger generation directors (now labelled as the Fourth Generation) who studied filmmaking before the Cultural Revolution but did not get a chance to practice till the late 1970s. To some extent, the directors of this generation, including Huang Jianzhong (黄建中), Xie Fei (谢飞), Huang Shuqin (黄蜀芹), Zheng Dongtian (郑洞天), Zhang Nuanxin (张暖忻), Wu Yigong (吴贻弓), Yan Xueshu (颜学恕), Lu Xiaoya (陆小雅), were most active in the early 1980s. Unlike their predecessors who specialised in revolutionary heroes and “typical” characters, these directors concentrated on human emotions, delighting in people's lives, and also endeavoured to explore different cinematic styles. Instead of arbitrary political judgements between “integrity” and “evil”, people started to see love,

³² Scar Literature is a genre of Chinese literature which emerged in the late 1970s, soon after the death of Mao, portraying the sufferings of intellectuals and innocent people within the turbulent historical campaigns (especially the Cultural Revolution).

emotion, vivid images, individuals, true lives and sentiment in their films. For example, though addressing the topic of war, the film *Flower* (小花, Xiaohua, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1979) was not devoted to depicting battle scenes, but highlighted two female protagonists' emotions. And the scar films they made, represented by *Narrow Street* (小街, Xiaojie, dir. Yang Yanjin, 1981) and *Evening Rain* (巴山夜雨, Bashanyeyu, dir. Wu Yigong, 1980), did not draw a boundary between "good person" and "bad person", but presented the humanist consideration of each individual's experiences and destinies in the political campaign. Thematically, these directors' films jumped out of the stereotyped topic of war and political campaigns: some depicted ordinary people's everyday lives, such as Zheng Dongtian's *Neighbour* (邻居, Linju, 1981); some discussed an individual's dilemma, such as Sun Yu's (孙羽) *At Middle Age* (人到中年, Rendao zhongnian, 1982), some confronted the previously taboo subject of heterosexual love (including subtle sexual content), such as Xie Fei's *A Girl from Hunan* (湘女潇潇, Xiangnǚxiaoxiao, 1986). In terms of technique, the Fourth generation, especially those taught in the BFA, enthusiastically participated in discussions and practice of the film aesthetic, theory, narrative technique and cinematic style newly introduced from the West. For example, *Narrow Street* suspends the illusion by providing several possible endings to the blind protagonist, and *My Memories of Old Beijing* (城南旧事, Chengnan jiushi, dir. Wu Yigong, 1984) presents an extraordinary poetic sentimentalism. Another noteworthy development was the prominence of a dozen women directors and their foci on female consciousness and narrative, such as *The Girl in Red* (红衣少女, Hongyi shaonǚ, dir. Lu Xiaoya, 1984),

Sacrificed Youth (青春祭, Qingchun ji, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1985) and *Human Woman Demon* (人·鬼·情, Renguqing, 1987).³³ Meanwhile, some Fourth Generation directors started to gain some international recognition by exhibiting their films in film festivals overseas, such as Wu Tianming's *Old Well* (老井, Laojing, 1986) which won Best Film at Tokyo International Film Festival 1987, and Xie Fei's *Black Snow* (本命年, Benmingnian, 1990) which won Silver Bear at Berlin International Film Festival 1990.

However, the filmmakers who brought Chinese cinema to international attention are the Fourth Generation's students, the first graduates from BFA after the Cultural Revolution, better known as the Fifth Generation, represented by Zhang Yimou (张艺谋), Chen Kaige (陈凯歌), Wu Ziniu (吴子牛), Tian Zhuangzhuang (田壮壮), Li Shaohong (李少红), and Gu Changwei (顾长卫). The film *One and Eight* (一个和八个, Yige he bage, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 张军钊, 1985), a film that deliberately blurs the distinction between heroes and villains, announced the emergence of the Fifth Generation. Subversion, historical reflection, and breakthrough are the keywords of these new graduates. When talking about *One and Eight*, Zhang Yimou said: "At that time, there were a lot of models and stereotypes of the issues like 'how to express' and 'how to make films'. We [the Fifth Generation] regarded those [doctrines] as stupid. Thus, *One and Eight* is a betrayal of these doctrines."³⁴ The subversion and breakthroughs these directors achieved are cinematic as much as ideological. Instead

³³ See a more detailed review of the "women's film" in mainland China after 1949 in 3.1.

³⁴ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 237. (当时)在电影的表达形式和如何拍电影这种最简单的问题上,常常出现很教条、很固定的东西。我们认为很陈腐、很愚蠢,所以《一个和八个》是针对这种迂腐的背叛。

of emphasising narrative, they highlight the cinematic-ness in their works. The poetic long-take shots used in *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, Huang tudi, dir. Chen Kaige, 1985), and also the rough and detailed portraying of Tibetan religious ceremonies in *Horse Thief* (盗马贼, Daomazei, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986), compelled the audience to contemplate the visual presentation more than the story. Zhang Yingjin has concluded that the early films of the Fifth Generation “feature minimal plot, scanty dialogue and diegetic music, natural lighting, and out-of-proportion frame composition, thereby presenting the visuals as the principal means of decoding meaning and narrative”³⁵. Their efforts in visual language exploration brought them some international recognition; for example, *Yellow Earth* won awards of the British Film Institute (1985), the Hawaii International Film Festival (1985), and the Locarno International Film Festival (1985) respectively, and *Evening Bell* (晚钟, Wanzhong, dir. Wu Ziniu, 1989) won Silver Bear in Berlin in 1989. On the other hand, they were also faulted for their obsession with modality which tended to alienate the general audience and the box-office. *King of the Children* (孩子王, Haiziwang, dir. Chen Kaige, 1988) even received a Golden Clock Award in Cannes (1988) from the journalists who particularly derided that film as extremely esoteric and boring.

The Golden Bear (Berlin, 1987) won by Zhang Yimou with his *Red Sorghum* (红高粱, Honggaoliang, 1987) aroused the general Chinese audiences’ interest in the Fifth Generation and their films. Employing bright colours, high-contrast light, and original folk music, the visual-aural world composed by Zhang Yimou, who came

³⁵ Zhang Yingjin, “Industry and Ideology”, 12.

from a cinematography educational background, proved extremely infectious. Unlike his counterparts of the Fifth Generation who highlighted the visual presentation but weakened the narrative in films, Zhang was also good at storytelling. In his own words, *Red Sorghum* was an experiment aiming to combine film spectacle and artistry.³⁶ Furthermore, the Chinese traditional elements in the film attracted the western audiences' curiosity about eastern culture. Though not huge, the 273,042Euro box-office rewards in Spain were a good beginning for the commercialisation of Chinese films' in western markets. The success of *Red Sorghum* affirmed Zhang Yimou's leading position in Chinese film production. In the following two decades, he was the most productive Chinese director, often appearing at a variety of international film festivals, and most of his films generated reasonably good box-office returns domestically and overseas, whether or not they were received positively or negatively by critics. From then on, many directors changed their styles to meet the international demand for ethnic cultural elements, glossy visuals, and polished narratives.

Besides the Third, Fourth and Fifth Generations, some directors who cannot be easily categorised into any existing generation also presented some significant art films in the 1980s and early 1990s, such as Huang Jianxin's (黄建新) *The Black Canon Incident* (黑炮事件, Heipao shijian, 1986) and Sun Zhou's (孙周) *Heart Fragrance* (心香, Xinxiang, 1992).³⁷

³⁶ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 241.

³⁷ Adam Lam has argued that the directors such as Jiang Wen (姜文), Huang Jianxin and Sun Zhou should not be categorised into any generation, because their experiences and films do not share similarities with any existing generation. Adam Lam, *Identity, Tradition and Globalism in Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Feature Films*, 301-302.

Actually, the concept of “market”, which was totally irrelevant to the Chinese filmmakers during the period from 1949 to the early 1980s, influenced not only the Fifth Generation. The fact that ticket sales in the Chinese film market declined by 5.2 billion from 1984 to 1985³⁸ alarmed the filmmakers and highlighted the necessity for entertaining elements in films. A number of entertainment genre films aimed at the domestic market consequently emerged. The box-office success of a mainland China-Hong Kong co-production *The Shaolin Temple* (少林寺, Shaolinsi, dir. Zhang Xinyan, 张鑫炎, 1982) began two trends. One was that the action movie became the most popular genre. With the rise of market consciousness, the directors, including the older and younger ones, started to choose the audiences’ favourite genres, like crime, espionage, suspense, gangster, and costume sword-play, and released many entertainment films such as *Kung Fu Hero Wang Wu* (大刀王五, Dadao wangwu, dir. Yu Lianqi, 于连起, 1985), *The Magic Braid* (神鞭, Shenbian, dir. Zhang Zi’en, 张子恩, 1986), *The Last Frenzy* (最后的疯狂, Zuihoude fengkuang, dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1987), and *The Case of the Silver Snake* (银环蛇谋杀案, Yinhuanshe mousha’an, dir. Li Shaohong, 1988). Some films addressing contemporary urban life, for instance, *With Sugar* (给咖啡加点糖, Geikafei jiandian tang, dir. Sun Zhou, 1987), *The Trouble Shooters* (顽主, Wanzhu, dir. Mi Jiashan, 米家山, 1988), and *Half Flame, Half Brine* (一半是火焰, 一半是海水, Yibanshi huoyan, yibanshi haishui, dir. Xia Gang, 夏刚, 1989), were also welcomed especially by the young audiences. Up until 1989, entertainment films occupied 75% of Chinese production. Another trend begun by *The*

³⁸ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 230.

Shaolin Temple was co-production between state-run (PRC) studios and Hong Kong studios³⁹. Such co-operation started with entertainment films aiming at markets in mainland China and Hong Kong – such as *New Fang Shiyu* (新方世玉, Xin fangshiyu, dir. Yang Fan, 杨帆, 1984), *Shanghai 1937* (大上海 1937, Dashanghai 1937, dir. Zhang Che, 张彻, 1986), *Yellow River Fighter* (黄河大侠, Huanghe daxia, dir. Zhang Xinyan & Zhang Zi'en, 1988), and *A Terracotta Warrior* (古今大战秦俑情, Gujin dazhan qinyong qing, dir. Cheng Xiaodong, 程小东, 1989), and then developed into big-budget productions, like *Raise the Red Lantern* (大红灯笼高高挂, Dahongdenglong gaogaogua, dir. Zhang Yimou 1991), which particularly sought international market and film festival awards.

Independent films, the national market and Chinese blockbusters: 1993 – Present Day

On 5th January 1993, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China (SARFT, 中国国家广播电影电视总局, Zhongguo guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju) announced the reform policy of the Chinese film system that sped up the industrialisation of Chinese film production. Despite the reform providing state-run studios more financial autonomy, their prospects were not good because the film market had shrunk considerably since the mid-1980s. In the early 1990s, state-run studios survived in two ways: making leitmotif films (主旋律电影, Zhu

³⁹ Hong Kong did not revert to PRC governance until 1997.

xuanlv dianying)⁴⁰ with governmental funding – such as the trilogy of *Decisive Engagement* (大决战, Dajuezhhan, dir. Li Jun, 1991-1992) and *Autumn Harvest Uprising* (秋收起义, Qiushou qiyi, dir. Zhou Kangyu, 周康渝, 1993), or co-operating with Hong Kong companies to generate much-needed cash by providing facilities, manpower and their labels; the labels were obligatory for films released in mainland China at that time.

A new group of directors – usually described as the Sixth Generation but categorised into post-fifth generation in this thesis⁴¹ – who graduated from BFA in the late 1980s, were just embarking on their careers when confronted by this inhospitable situation in the early 1990s. Since the financially challenged state-run studios could hardly offer them opportunities for directing, most of them – represented by Zhang Yuan (张元), Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅), He Jianjun (何建军) and Guan Hu (管虎) – started their directing careers through self-financed or privately funded productions. Some purchased studio labels for their release; for example, Guan Hu's *Dirt* (头发乱了, Toufa luanle, 1994) was released with the label of inner-Mongolian Film Studio (内蒙古电影制片厂, Neimenggu dianying zhipianchang). Some others like Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai gave up on public release in China and screened their films overseas without governmental (PRC) approval. Therefore, the rise of these directors introduced a brand new conception to China, independent/underground films⁴², which refers to films made outside the

⁴⁰ “Leitmotif films, named as Zhu xuanlv dianying (主旋律电影) in Chinese, offer an official or officially-approved version of the past or contemporary society, embodying progressive official ideologies, with an emphasis on patriotism and nationalism.” I borrow the term “leitmotif film” and the definition of it from Chen Yunxiang’s essay “The Seduction of Feminine Power: A New Trend in China's Leitmotif films”, in *Cultural Interactions and Interpretations in a Global Age*, ed. Ji Fengyuan, Lin Jinhua and Susan Bouterey (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2011), 195.

⁴¹ I define the Chinese post-fifth-generation filmmakers in detail in 1.2.

⁴² The definition of “Chinese independent films” is in 7.1.

governmental system and censorship. The international acceptance of independent films like *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, Beijing zazhong, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993) and *The Days* (冬春的日子, Dongchun de rizi, dir. Wang Ziaoshuai, 1992) encouraged a number of young directors to take up independent filmmaking, though with no hope of public release in China. These directors include, to name a few, Zhang Ming (章明), Lu Xue Chang (路学长), Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯) and Lou Ye (娄烨). The period between 1996 and 2002 was a golden period of independent filmmaking in mainland China. During this period, some illustrious independent films were presented by this generation of directors, such as Zhang Ming's *In Expectation* (巫山云雨, Wushanyunyu, 1996), Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (小武, Xiaowu, 1997), Liu Bingjian's (刘冰鉴) *Men and Women* (男男女女, Nannan nǚnǚ, 1999), Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (苏州河, Suzhouhe, 1999), and Wang Chao's (王超) *Anyang Orphan* (安阳婴儿, Anyang ying'er, 2001). What is noteworthy is that some of the independent filmmakers came from other artistic fields, which could hardly happen in a state-run studio. In 2003, seven independent directors⁴³ wrote an open letter to SARFT to declare their dissatisfaction at being "underground" and their desire to release films in Chinese cinema. Meanwhile, the "Regulations on Administration of Film" implemented since 1st February 2002 declared that "The government encourages enterprises, institutions, other social organisations, and individuals to participate in film production as sponsors and investors"⁴⁴. Besides Zhang Yuan, who started to cooperate with the state-run studio in 1999, several independent filmmakers – such as

⁴³ Namely, He Jianjun, Ju Anqi (睢安奇), Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Xianmin(张献民) and Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇).

⁴⁴ Web data, "Regulations on Administration of Films", accessed Oct. 21, 2005, <http://news.xinhuanet.com> 2001.12.31. 国家鼓励企业、事业单位和其他社会组织以及个人以资助、投资的形式参与摄制电影片。

Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuechang, and Li Yu (李玉) – moved to film production under censorship one after another from 2003.⁴⁵

On the other hand, some other new graduates from BFA and CAD in late 1980s and early 1990s chose to work in the state-run studios, exemplified by Hu Xueyang (胡雪杨), Li Xin (李欣), Zhang Yang (张杨) and Shi Runjiu (施润玖). Unlike their colleagues seeking international recognition, these directors aimed at the national market. To get access to broad local audiences, they usually adopted relaxing topics, appealing plots, smooth narratives and accessible visual presentation in their films. Some of their films – such as the urban light comedies *Spicy Love Soup* (爱情麻辣烫, *Aiqing malatang*, dir. Zhang Yang, 1997), and *A Beautiful New World* (美丽新世界, *Meili xinshijie*, dir. Shi Runjiu, 1999), and the romantic dramas *Spring Subway* (开往春天的地铁, *Kaiwang chuntian de ditie*, dir. Zhang Yibai, 张一白, 2002) and *Dazzling* (花眼, *Huayan*, dir. Li Xin, 2002) – were accepted well by the Chinese audience, especially the younger patrons.

The change of economical context of Chinese film production also required the veteran filmmakers to face the pressure of the box-office. Encouraged by the regular overseas success of Zhang Yimou's films – *Raise the Red Lantern* and *The Story of Qiuju* (秋菊打官司, *Qiuju daguansi*, 1992) after *Red Sorghum*, several veteran filmmakers shifted to making films especially aimed at winning international film festival awards; these are not only a gateway to overseas markets, but also an effective advertisement to the domestic audience. These award-winning films included

⁴⁵ I review the brief history of Chinese independent films particularly in 7.1.

Farewell My Concubine (霸王别姬, Bawangbieji, dir. Chen Kaige, 1993), *Ermo* (二嫖, Ermo, dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 周晓文, 1994), *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker* (炮打双灯, Paodashuangdeng, dir. He Ping, 何平, 1994). To meet the international demand for ethnic cultural spectacles, these films are usually composed with exotic visuals and a grotesque story. Most of these films are co-produced by the state-run studios and production companies in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

While these famous directors were busy playing the Chinese-ness card in the international arena, Feng Xiaogang rose up in the domestic production industry with his New Year celebration films (贺岁片, Hesuipian). The New Year Celebration film is a film genre referring to films released particularly during the Lunar New Year holiday, and originally launched in Hong Kong more than two decades earlier. “Because of the timing, these films are usually characterised by being light comedies with a huge cast of popular stars and being suitable for family audiences.”⁴⁶ Feng’s films, which contain humorous dialogues full of local, everyday life references, as well as the director’s critical yet apolitical approach to the socio-cultural dilemmas of contemporary Chinese people, captured local audiences’ hearts immediately. His first New Year celebration film *The Dream Factory* (甲方乙方, Jiafangyifang, 1997) won a great box-office success of thirty-six million RMB, which even beat the huge international star Jackie Chan’s (成龙, Cheng Long) film *Who Am I?* (我是谁, Woshishui, 1997) which earned seven million RMB at the Chinese box-office.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Adam Lam, “To Be or Not to Be: New Year Celebration Films by Feng Xiaogang”, in *Ethnic Identities and Linguistic Expressions: Languages, Literatures and Cultural Interaction in an Age of Globalization*, ed. J. Lin, K. Henshall & H. Xiao (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 2006), 186.

⁴⁷ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 284.

From then on, Feng Xiaogang made a series of New Year celebration films – *Be There or Be Square* (不见不散, Bujianbusan, 1998), *Sorry Baby* (没完没了, Meiwanmeiliao, 1999), *The Big Shot Funeral* (大腕, Dawan, 2001), *Cell Phone* (手机, Shouji, 2003), and so on – and became a popular director for the local market. Adam Lam (林勇) has classified his films as Chinese national cinema, because “they are made and consumed by the locals; because they ‘authentically’ represent China as it is, rather than making a kind of Chinese artefact for Western consumption”⁴⁸.

After China was accepted into the WTO in 1999, the Chinese film industry had no choice but to face globalised competition. The government correspondingly accelerated system reform with respect to collectivisation management, theatre chain building, and foreign capital financing. The eligibility criteria for filmmaking were also relaxed to a certain extent. When national film production was seriously threatened by imported films, especially Hollywood blockbusters, some directors chose to embrace the Hollywood mode and storm the overseas markets with their films. The release of Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (英雄, Yingxiong, 2002) announced the arrival of the Chinese blockbuster on the international stage. The film was made and released in a globalised mode: ten companies from mainland China, Hong Kong, the United States and Australia participated in its production, and twenty-four distributors released the film in approximately fifty countries and autonomous regions. Moreover, its worldwide box-office takings of 177,394,432USD⁴⁹, in which 123,684,413USD

⁴⁸ Adam Lam, “To Be or Not to Be”, 192.

⁴⁹ Web data, “Global Box-Office of *Hero*”, accessed July 28, 2011, <http://hi.baidu.com/%D5%C2%D7%D3%E2%F9%B0%C9%B9%A4%D7%F7%D7%E9/blog/item/8675d93c9829cdd1d5622588.html>.

was from overseas cinemas, were impressive when compared with its budget of around thirty-five million USD (estimated)⁵⁰. Since its production and distribution mode was very similar to that of Hollywood blockbusters – high-budget production aimed at worldwide mass markets with associated merchandising, I call this kind of Chinese film the “Chinese blockbuster”. Several directors who were capable of attracting massive funding (including overseas investment) with their worldwide reputations marched to the global market with their Chinese blockbusters, such as *House of Flying Draggers* (十面埋伏, Shimianmanfu, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2004), *The Promise* (无极, Wuji, dir. Chen Kaige, 2005), *Legend of the Black Scorpion* (夜宴, Yeyan, dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2006), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (满城尽带黄金甲, Mancheng jindai huangjinjia, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2006), *The Warrior and the Wolf* (狼灾记, Langzaiji, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 2009). Unlike those artistic films that went overseas seeking awards in the 1990s, these films pursued both domestic and overseas markets and contained more entertainment elements: legendary stories, fantastic action scenes, magnificent settings, luxurious costumes, and a cast of popular stars.

Chinese film production gradually completed its industrialisation and marketisation in the mid 2000s, featuring a constant rise in the quantity of domestic feature films: 212 films in 2004, 330 films in 2006 and 400 films in 2007. Today (2011), there are thirty-six mainstream theatre chains, more than six thousand cinemas, thirty-six large studios and more than one hundred private studios in China.⁵¹ Furthermore, the relatively relaxed system provides diversity in film production.

⁵⁰ Accessed July 28, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299977/>.

⁵¹ Ding Yaping, *A Brief History of China Cinema*, 331-332.

Besides the big-budget blockbusters, mid-budget national entertainment films, such as Ning Hao's (宁浩) *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头, Fengkuang de shitou, 2006) and *Crazy Racer* (疯狂的赛车, Fengkuang de saiche, 2009), there are literary films, such as *In Love We Trust* (左右, Zuoyou, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2008), *I Wish I Knew* (海上传奇, Haishang chuanqi, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2010) and *Apart Together* (团圆, Tuanyuan, dir. Wang Quan'an, 王全安, 2010). Small-budget films – such as some TV movies – can also survive in China today.

On the other hand, the film censorship system, although it has been a controversial issue for two decades, has not been replaced by a film rating system to date. This is still an unsettled issue.⁵²

⁵² I discuss the confliction between Chinese filmmakers and the censorship in 7.1.

Filmography

Films Made by Post-fifth-generation Directors:

1989

Dai, Sijie. *China, My Sorrow* (牛棚, Niupeng).

1990

Wu, Wenguang. *Roaming Beijing: the Last Dreamer* (流浪北京: 最后的梦想者,

Liulang beijing: zuihou de mengxiangzhe). Documentary.

Zhang, Yuan. *Mama* (妈妈, Mama).

1992

Shi, Jian. *I've Graduated* (我毕业了, Wobiyele). Documentary.

Wang, Xiaoshuai. *The Days* (冬春的日子, Dongchunde rizi).

1993

He, Jianjun. *Red Beans* (悬恋, Xuanlian).

Lou, Ye. *Weekend Lover* (周末情人, Zhoumo qingren).

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